

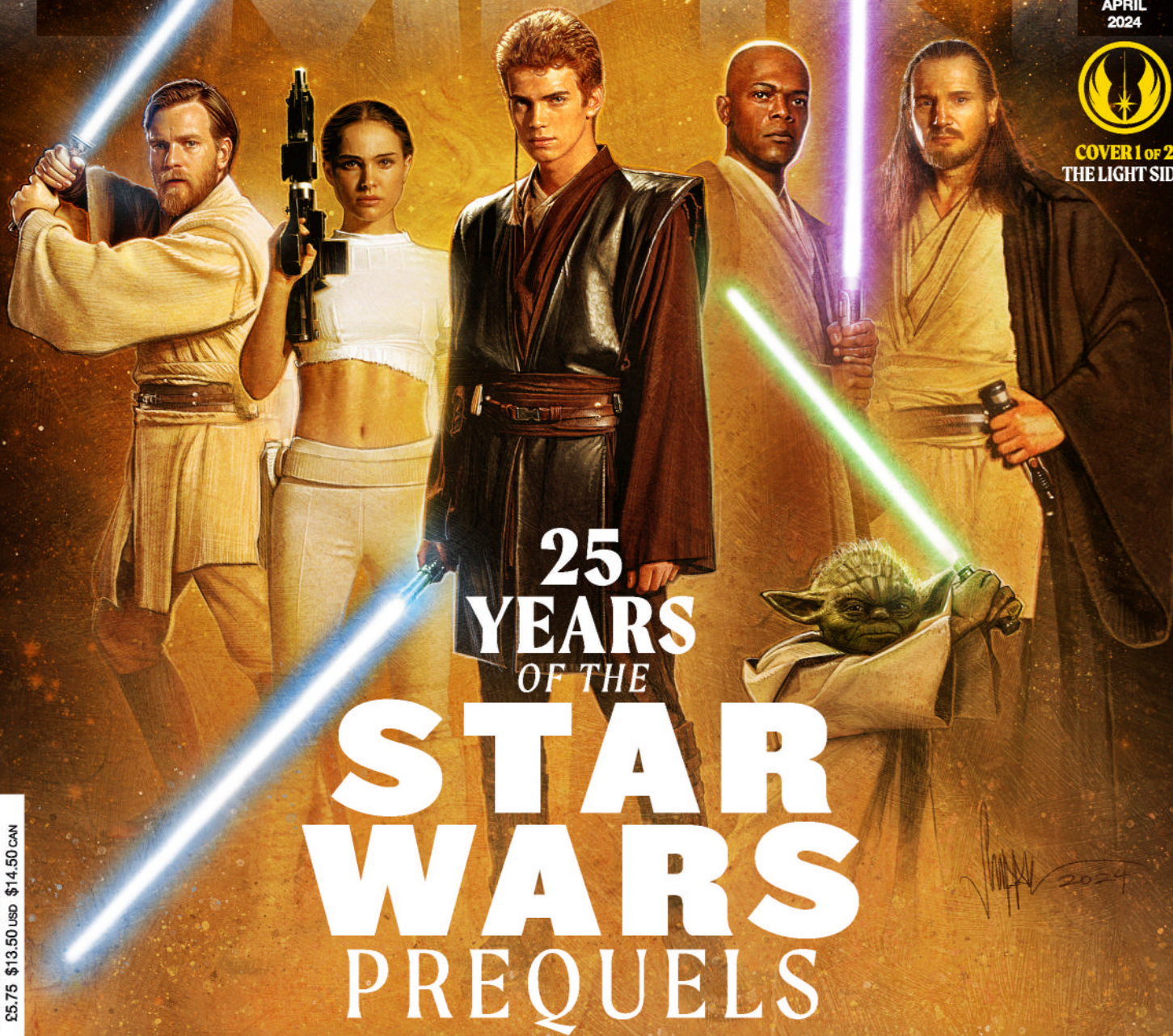
# X-MEN '97 MARVEL'S OG MUTANTS RETURN

# EMPIRE

APRIL  
2024



COVER 1 OF 2  
THE LIGHT SIDE



## 25 YEARS OF THE STAR WARS PREQUELS

**BRAND-NEW INTERVIEWS!**

**EWAN MCGREGOR, NATALIE PORTMAN, LIAM NEESON,  
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...

**PLUS**

...

**CIVIL WAR**

FIRST WORD ON ALEX GARLAND'S  
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WELCOME TO 2024'S MOST  
MONSTROUS TEAM-UP

**LOVE LIES BLEEDING**

KRISTEN STEWART ON  
HER BODYBUILDING NOIR

**BACK TO BLACK**

INSIDE THE CONTROVERSIAL  
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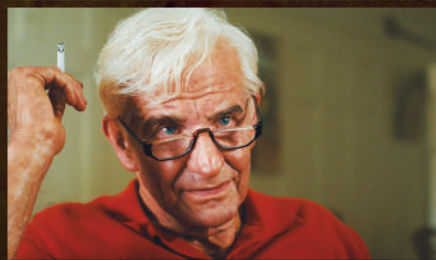
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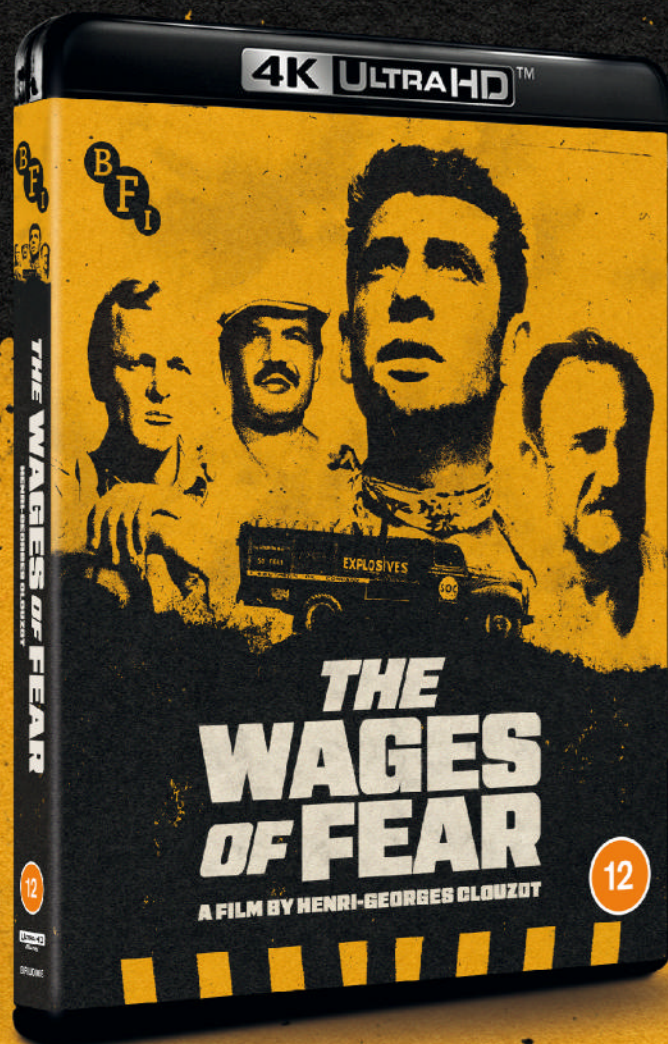




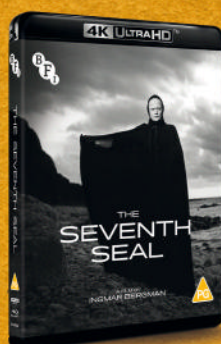
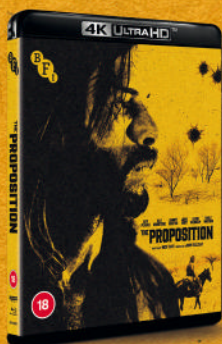
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A LOT WENT down in 1999. Neo learned kung fu. Some campers met a witch in the woods. Tyler Durden took his shirt off. A shark tried to cook LL Cool J in an oven. But through all the hype and excitement, one thing reverberated loudest of all. The return of *Star Wars*.

George Lucas could have bought his own planet (Georgonosis?) with his riches from the original trilogy and retired in peace. Instead, he poured his soul into three new films, flipping the formula so that they started with triumph (well, Gungans having a party) and ended with tears, death and a politician smirking. The movies caused a few tears themselves, some fans left feeling bereft by their digital sheen, the baroque supporting characters, the dialogue about sand.

Undeniably, the films are flawed. But after rocking pop culture on first impact, they've only grown in power. A whole new generation has embraced them, an ever-expanding batch of *Star Wars* projects have been inspired by them, a billion internet memes have been spawned, and their strengths, from the blistering duels to the prescient politics, have aged as gracefully as Yoda.

And when we decided to look back at them, it turned out all the key players in the cast wanted to join us. Ewan McGregor called us from the set of his new project, Natalie Portman reflected on her experiences from LA, Liam Neeson spoke to us from the top of a literal mountain, and Hayden Christensen (Toronto) and Ian McDiarmid (Edinburgh) agreed to photoshoots celebrating their dark



side. Oh, and Brian Blessed bellowed at us for nearly an hour about his frog-man Boss Nass. Our ears are still ringing. It was glorious.

From page 47, we dive deep into a trilogy that dared to take wild swings, with its lightsabers and with its plotting. Come with us, if you will, to the higher ground.

Enjoy the issue.



## SUBSCRIBER COVER



**This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Bill McConkey**  
Contributing editor Bill went above and beyond with this cover, a veritable tipped-over toybox of prequel characters. It's packed with gloriously detailed depictions of characters famous and obscure — ten points if you spot Oppo Rancisis!

**TURN TO PAGE 10 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE MEMBERSHIP**



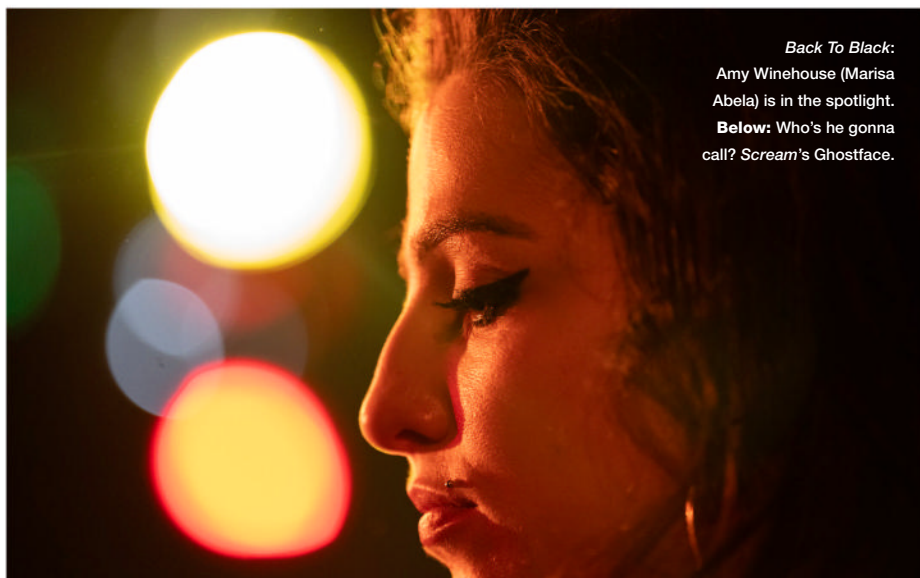
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"Is it ALF?"



# EMPIRE CONTENTS



*Back To Black:*  
Amy Winehouse (Marisa Abela) is in the spotlight.  
*Below:* Who's he gonna call? *Scream*'s Ghostface.

## first word

**12 CIVIL WAR**  
Alex Garland on his biggest and most explosive film to date. Stand well back.

**14 X-MEN '97**  
The beloved animated series is back, but with a Marvel Studios twist.

**18 KATHRYN NEWTON**  
The star of *Lisa Frankenstein* on falling in love with horror. Have you seen *Ant-Man And The Wasp: Quantumania*? Terrifying.

**20 GODZILLA X KONG: THE NEW EMPIRE**  
Adam Wingard on the latest collab between a giant ape and an angry lizard. We like this new trend of inserting the word "Empire" into movie titles. Take note, Kevin Feige.

**26 ABIGAIL**  
Radio Silence break their radio silence on a new horror icon: a ballerina vampire.

**31 PINT OF MILK**  
Giancarlo Esposito, ol' Gus Fring himself, takes our legendary Q&A. Meet *El Hermano De Leche*.

## reviews

**32 PERFECT DAYS**  
Wim Wenders is back, and on form. That's what we call a Wim-Wim situation.

**38 ARGYLLE**  
Has the King of *Kingsman* found a new Queen?

**41 CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM: SEASON 12**  
Larry David, that most beloved of aunts, bows out.

## features

**47 25 YEARS OF THE STAR WARS PREQUELS**  
We're going to party like it's 1999, with an epic celebration of George Lucas' *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, including...

**48 HAYDEN CHRISTENSEN**  
Vader speaks!

**58 NATALIE PORTMAN**  
Where is Padmé? Here!

**72 IAN McDIARMID**  
Somehow, Palpatine reflects.

**78 BACK TO BLACK**  
Director Sam Taylor-Johnson and star Marisa Abela on capturing that unique Amy Winehouse spirit.

**84 3 BODY PROBLEM**  
David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, the powers behind *Game Of Thrones*, on adapting another unfilmable book.

**90 LOVE LIES BLEEDING**  
Rose Glass returns with a wildly different second movie. Saints be praised.

## final cut

**96 J.A. BAYONA**  
The director of *Society Of The Snow* on survival, Spielberg and Superman.

**106 THE RANKING**  
Do you like scary movies? How about *Scream* movies? How about *Empire* writers ranking *Scream* movies? Do you like that? DO YOU?

**110 LEE CHILD**  
Reacher may say nothing. Luckily, his creator doesn't follow suit.

## DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH



**NORMAN WONG PHOTOGRAPHED HAYDEN CHRISTENSEN**

"I had literally just been watching the prequels with my six-year-old kiddo when I got the call to photograph Anakin Skywalker himself. It was quite serendipitous. Hayden was an absolute gem of a human being. Very generous and warm. Canada makes some great people!"



**ALEX GODFREY SPOKE TO PAUL MESCAL AND ANDREW SCOTT**

"I adore *All Of Us Strangers* with my whole heart, so it was truly special to spend time with these wonderful men for an Empire Podcast interview, and witness their chemistry up close. There was a lot of love in that room! Much of it from me. Also, we discussed cupcakes."



**BETH WEBB INTERVIEWED MIA MCKENNA-BRUCE AT THE EMPIRE PODCAST LIVE**

"For me, the best part of *Empire*'s live shows happens backstage; witnessing Tom Hiddleston and Mia McKenna-Bruce swapping new-parent stories before we headed onstage — after Ray Winstone had praised her performance in *How To Have Sex* — was a joy to see."

Marco Vitur. Spineless issue 424: Newsstand: Legacy Ghostbusters: "Oh, this is so exciting. You're about to learn who ya gonna call. It's Ghostbusters!" is from *Zombieland*. New Ghostbusters: "Who ya gonna call — Ghostbusters?" "Denise" is from *Without A Paddle*. Subs: "New main characters, yes. But supported by and related to legacy characters. Not quite a reboot, not quite a sequel" is from *Scream* (2022).



MEET  
THE  
STARS!

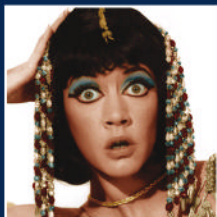
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A PASSAGE TO INDIA  
CARRY ON, STAR WARS



**DICK WIEAND**  
FRIDAY 13TH:  
A NEW BEGINNING



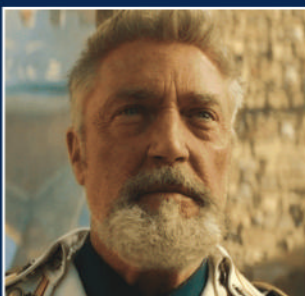
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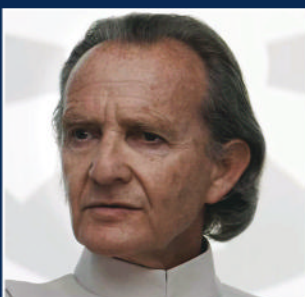
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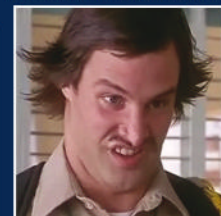
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THE MUMMY, STAR WARS



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SCARY MOVIE  
DEVIL'S REJECTS



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# EMPIRE COMMENT

## LETTER OF THE MONTH



### A MAGNIFICENT MAN WRITES

I just wanted to say how much I'm enjoying receiving my magazine. It's a delight to receive something tangible that you can read, and cut out bits to keep. As an 'older' person, the first film I saw at a cinema was *Those Magnificent Men In Their Flying Machines*. *Empire's* brought me back in touch with the world of current cinema, and to that end I've got back into visiting my local one on a regular basis. Great movies deserve our attention on a BIG screen!

ALAN LETTS, EASTBOURNE

*Heartily agree, Alan! Please enjoy some more big-screen experiences on us with this Picturehouse membership. We're now angling for a re-release of Those Magnificent Men In Their Flying Machines.*

**Picturehouse**

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### ON THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF A NEW JURASSIC WORLD FILM IN DEVELOPMENT:

I'm still wondering how any of the guests ever get travel insurance.

B. DE CLÈIR

### THE FAMOUS FIVE

WTF? Do my eyes deceive me? A few years ago I started to catalogue all your five-star reviews.

What I seem to remember is that the most five-star reviews in one issue was three. As I said, WTF? There are *four* five-star reviews in March 2024. So are you relaxing your standards or is this truly the greatest month in 424 issues?

CLINT WILLIAMS, VIA EMAIL

*It's rare, but not unprecedented: our March 2017 issue also had four five-starrers, for example.*

*Awards season equals a glut of great films.*



Still an emotional mess after seeing *All Of Us Strangers* on Friday — crying at the *Empire* Podcast interview with Scott and Mescal is peak Jen, though.

@JENN\_FER\_A

### KING OF KINGS

My wife and I just watched the most excellent *Priscilla* and I got to wondering: who is the best actor to have played Elvis on screen? For me, Val Kilmer in *True Romance* will always be 'The King'.

PHIL SLOAN, BEXLEY VILLAGE

*Always Nicolas Cage in Wild At Heart, performing an Elvis ballad at a thrash-metal club. Uh-huh-huh.*

## THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:  
WHAT BIG SURPRISES WOULD  
YOU LIKE TO SEE AT THIS  
YEAR'S OSCARS?



I can't help but foresee a terrible *Barbie/Poor Things* crossover sketch...

@DAMIEN\_A\_P

That the Oscars are entertaining, with a small number of snappy categories and engaging speeches,

making the ordeal watchable... Imagine that!

@SARDIONERAK

An original screenplay win for *Past Lives*. *Empire's* film of the year (as well as mine).

@BILLYWH46834879

All Skarsgård on stage at the same time!

@JONATANWIK

Jack Black hijacking the ceremony to sing 'Peaches'.

@MW\_A

WATCH OUT FOR THE NEXT QUESTION VIA OUR X ACCOUNT: @EMPIREMAGAZINE

## PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

### DARTH VADER 'BREATHING' COVER JUNE 2005

Rarely a stranger to our magazine, *Star Wars* graced *Empire's* cover multiple times during the prequels' original release, with extensive coverage of all three films. It all culminated in this famous *Revenge Of The Sith* collector's item of an issue — notable for being the world's first 'breathing' cover. Open it up, and Darth Vader's iconic kssshhh noise plays back: the dark side of the Force, distilled into an audio microchip.

The cover was months in the making, involving discussions with Lucasfilm over the use of Ben Burtt's original sound effect (the negotiations were short) and some logistical printing worries (much debate was had about glue). Happily, it remains one of our bestselling issues, and was shortlisted for the PPA's Cover Of The Century. Sometimes, late at night in the *Empire* office, we can still hear it breathing. At least, we hope that's what we can hear.



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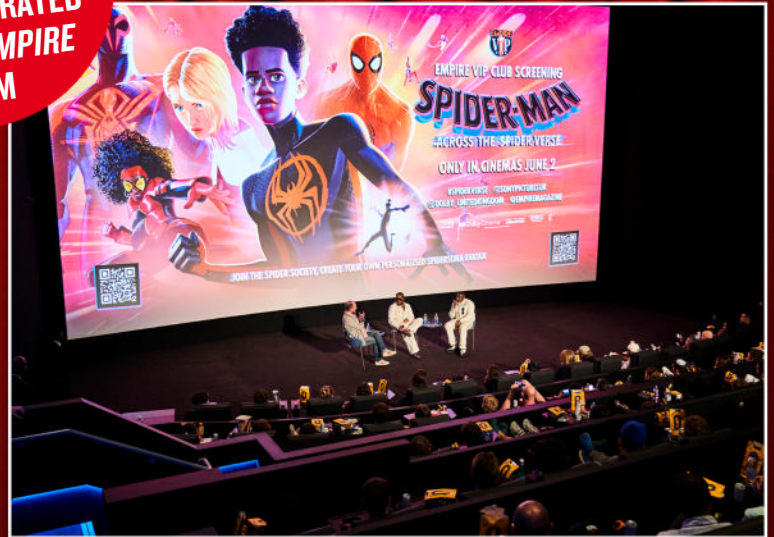
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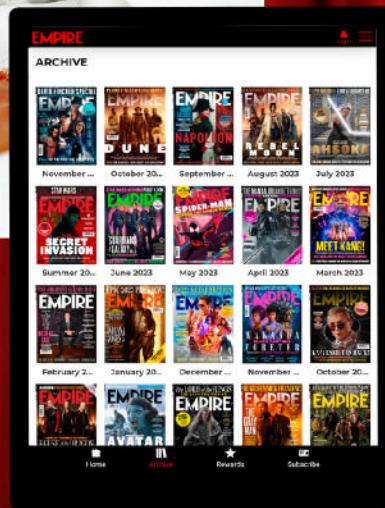
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# first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

APRIL 2024 | EDITED BY BETH WEBB

## Alex Garland ignites America

THE FILMMAKER ON SETTING THE STATES AGAINST EACH OTHER IN CIVIL WAR

WORDS ALEX GODFREY

ALEX GARLAND IS no stranger to genre mischief. His three films as director, *Ex Machina*, *Annihilation* and *Men*, have all featured fantastical elements: murderous, sentient robots, alien shimmers and, well, men giving birth to men from unexpected orifices. His latest, *Civil War*, though, looks a little more down-to-earth. "I've seen it described as sci-fi, but I don't see it as sci-fi at all," he tells *Empire*. "There's no 'sci' in it, for a start." Whatever you want to call it, the film, starring Kirsten Dunst, Cailee Spaeny and Jesse Plemons, doesn't seem any less discomfiting than his back catalogue, focusing on violent unrest across America: an uprising which sees the White House under attack. Here, Garland tells us what he's exploring.

### THE STATES

Despite the lack of "sci", the film is set in the immediate future: "any time from here to eight years forward", says Garland. Regardless, America has been torn apart. "This is a kind of fracturing civil war," he explains of the situation on the ground. "There are many, many factions and groups. It's like the civil wars that one

typically sees in the world, where there are many competing forces with different agendas." Here, the "western forces" of Texas and California — unlikely bedfellows, maybe — have teamed up to revolt against what looks like an oppressive US government. Why that specific union? "That's embedded in the film," he teases. "I tend not to spell things out in films. I sometimes feel overly spoon-fed by cinema, and so I probably just react against that. That question, why Texas and California, is a question that I want the audience to ask."

### THE PRESS

"The film is tracking a group of journalists," says Garland of the plot. "And there are three generations of them: an older journalist, played by Stephen McKinley Henderson; a younger journalist, played by Cailee Spaeny; and two contemporaries in the middle, Wagner Moura and Kirsten Dunst." In the preview footage, we hear that journalists are being shot at by armed forces. Certainly it seems that the press are not in favour with the powers-that-be. "I suppose inevitably, this gets political," explains Garland. "Journalists are vilified, often, by all sorts of different people. By politicians, by the public. It's not necessarily a side of a political spectrum.

And the truth is that if you want a government with checks and balances, you need journalists. In the inferences within the film, one of them is an inference about journalists, and about how important they are."

### THE MILITIA

In the footage we've seen, Plemons looks like he's playing a gun-toting militia lapdog for the authorities. But the situation might not be so clear-cut. "He's not exactly... well, it depends how you define militia," says Garland. "There are various groups [in the film], some of them are uniformed, some of them are not uniformed. If you were a soldier in a state that had broken away and affiliated with another state or a cluster of other states, would you be a militia, or would you say, 'I am an official force of that new breakaway government'? So, some of the people that are encountered are what one would normally call a militia." Depends who you're talking to. "Yes, it depends who you're talking to, and it also depends how they perceive themselves."

### THE PRESIDENT

In the film's trailer, the Commander-In-Chief (Nick Offerman) assures the country that the





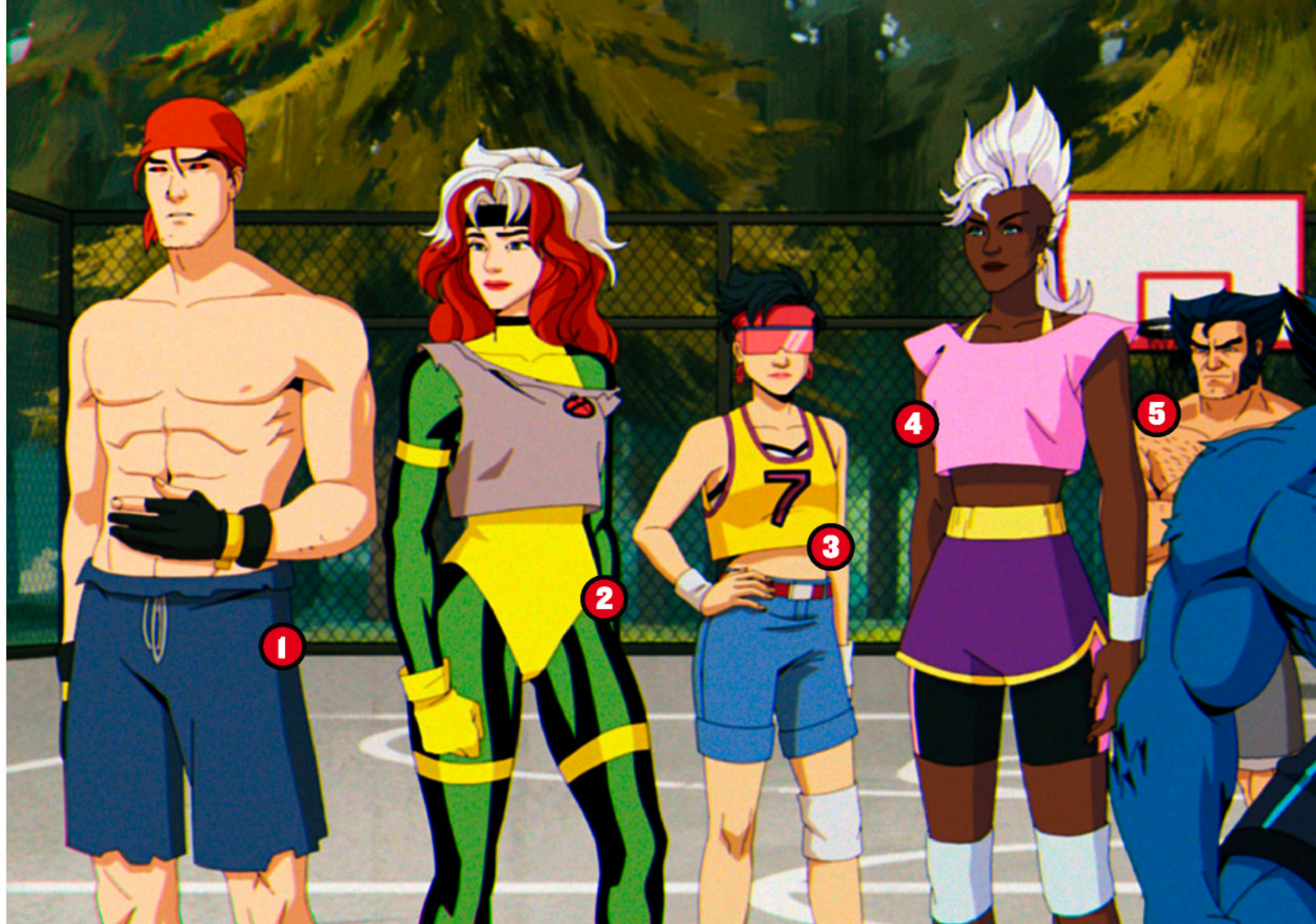
**Above:** Journalists played by Kirsten Dunst and Cailee Spaeny are in the firing line as America goes to war, with itself. **Left:** Entering dangerous territory: Wagner Moura's press-man and Spaeny tread carefully.

uprising will be dealt with swiftly. Not that he seems like a reassuring kind of guy. “He casts a shadow across the whole film,” says Garland of the character, who orders the military to put a stop to these western forces, launching airstrikes against citizens. “You’re not necessarily with him a great deal, but he’s got an important role in the film, both narratively and thematically.” Offerman reunites with Garland after starring in his TV series *Devs* and, having played a slippery fellow in that show, makes perfect sense here. “Nick is difficult to pin down,” explains Garland. “Some actors come with a kind of immediate baggage about what they represent, and I think that’s more unclear with lots of the choices, actually.” As with all Alex Garland films, *Civil War* looks set to provide much food for thought. But resolutely not spoon-fed.

ALEX GODFREY

CIVIL WAR IS IN CINEMAS FROM 12 APRIL





# Marvel's mutants return to 2D

THE CREATIVES BEHIND X-MEN '97 TALK US THROUGH THE HEROES OF THE NEW ANIMATED SERIES

WORDS **HELEN O'HARA**

SHOWRUNNER BEAU DEMAYO didn't need to rewatch *X-Men: The Animated Series* when he started work on its sequel; he'd binged it all during the pandemic. "I don't know if there would be an MCU without this show," he says of the popular Saturday-morning series which ran from 1992. "It's the grandfather of everything we see today."

With the memory fresh in his mind, DeMayo went out to the desert in Joshua Tree National Park and thought about the essential elements they needed to retain for the new show. The relationships between the characters; the fact that they had faced adult problems in a kids' cartoon, from race to the AIDS crisis; the exciting powers that could be combined in cool new ways: these were key. Speaking with *Empire*, DeMayo and supervising producer Jake Castorena introduce the (old) new MVPs of the MCU.

## 1. GAMBIT

Gambit is famed for his card-throwing skills, his ability to charge objects with energy, and his

on-off relationship with fellow mutant Rogue. "That's our one true pairing," says DeMayo. To modernise the story, they had to examine that romance, specifically how it's going to work between a telekinetic man and a woman who can't touch anyone without syphoning off their powers and memory.

## 2. ROGUE

DeMayo refers to Rogue as "this great mascot for the show — not in the high-school type of way". He interprets the power that physically isolates her from the world as an extreme form of empathy. "She can find a deeper type of intimacy and connection. You'll see that's a central theme this season."

## 3. JUBILEE

Teenager Jubilation 'Jubilee' Lee, who can generate pyrotechnic energy-blasts from her hands, was always an audience surrogate for younger viewers. But now that role gets complicated. "Jubilee always wants to be an adult, right?" says DeMayo. "Well, it's time to start adulting."

## 4. STORM

In the comics, powerful weather mutant Storm has literally been worshipped by the people of the Serengeti. For DeMayo, what's interesting is how she handles those divine expectations. "Where is the room for her humanity? Where does she have the ability to be vulnerable [when she has] that much power?"

## 5. WOLVERINE

The "broken-hearted samurai who thinks he's an animal", as DeMayo describes him, has been the heart of many an X-film since the show finished, yet there's always more to mine. As Castorena says, "What I love is, he has the most combat [training] of everyone on the team just because he's been alive long enough, and he throws it out the window every time."

## 6. BEAST

Everyone's favourite "uncle", as labelled by DeMayo, remains the literally and figuratively cuddliest member of the team. "He's the guy who's always going to say the right thing, even if he's quoting somebody else. He's always going to



## THE PLATFORM

**“It’s obvious but true: owning a disc means nobody can take it away”**



**BEN TRAVIS ON WHY PHYSICAL MEDIA IS MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER**

I’LL ADMIT IT: I’d become complacent. As a long-term physical-media advocate with an unhealthy attachment to my Blu-rays, I’ve always believed in paying to own works of art that I love. (“Works of art” here encompassing the *Before Trilogy* on Criterion, the complete works of Bong Joon Ho, and long-forgotten 1998 sports comedy *BASEketball*.) But in the streaming era, I too had started to let that slip. In the current economic climate, can I really drop £10 on a physical copy of something available on a streamer?

A few different factors recently jolted me back into action; reminders that actually *owning* the films you love is important. For one, both Guillermo del Toro and Christopher Nolan said so. (Truly, who am I to argue?) As del Toro wrote on X, owning movies on disc means you become “the custodian of those films for generations to come”. And Nolan recently stated he’d packed *Oppenheimer*’s disc with extras to entice people to buy it, “so no evil streaming service can come steal it from you”. They’re right. Cloud-based media feels infinitely available, until it suddenly isn’t.

Recently, certain Netflix exclusives have disappeared from the service — among them, super-sharp home-invasion slasher *Hush* by Mike Flanagan (himself an advocate of physical media, who’s long — unsuccessfully — petitioned Netflix for a physical release of his

*Midnight Mass*). And then there was the shock news about Best Buy, the US store chain, deciding to do away with its sales of DVDs and Blu-rays entirely. It’s obvious but true: owning a physical disc means nobody can take it away.

Yet it’s not all bleak news. Another factor that has me falling back in love with physical discs is the return of HMV to London’s Oxford Street. Sure, the ground floor is a Funko emporium (fine, if it brings punters in), but the upstairs is wonderful — films decked out with care on floor-to-ceiling shelves, well-curated and easy to browse. HMV and Fopp remain the last bastion of Blu-rays on UK streets. Last time they went into administration, prices on Amazon sky-rocketed. Now, I try and spend a little there every month, on films I know I’ll rewatch for years on end.

I still get a tangible thrill buying a film that means something to me — a personal as well as financial investment, money put firmly where my mouth is, my own curated collection growing. The latest addition? *Babylon*, which flailed in cinemas, but refuses to leave my mind. Sure, it’s unlikely to disappear digitally any time soon — but I want Damien Chazelle to know how much I appreciated his three-hour epic. Please, take my money. And what do you know? It has an entire disc of extras. Consider my obsession fed.

I don’t know about you, but I’m Team Nolan and del Toro on this one. Anyone for *BASEketball*?



The X factor: The stars of the new animated X-Men Marvel series line up.

have a solution. It may not be the perfect solution, but he’s going to try very, very hard to fix the scientific problem of the day.”

## 7. MORPH

The death of shapeshifter Morph in the original animated series (it didn’t stick, obviously) was shocking for young viewers, and it stuck with DeMayo. “He really set the stakes,” he says, “and he had a very interesting relationship with the team because of trauma.” This is a lighter take on the character, who is nonbinary and has an interesting buddy relationship with Wolverine. The character’s past with Mister Sinister, the show’s villain, could also come into play.

## 8. BISHOP

Time-travelling energy-absorber Bishop embodies the show’s themes for DeMayo. “He’s a man out of time, wondering what his future is. This season is very much about what happens when the X-Men are faced with a future they didn’t expect.” Can — and should — they carry on Professor X’s dream of peaceful co-existence with humanity following the Professor’s fatal injury and departure at the end of the original series? Only time, and episodes, will tell.

X-MEN ‘97 IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 20 MARCH



# Inside the weird world of fake movie trailers

MILLIONS OF PEOPLE ARE WATCHING TEASERS FOR THE LIKES OF *GLADIATOR 2* AND *DEADPOOL 3*. THE CATCH: THEY'RE PHONEY

WORDS **VICTORIA LUXFORD**

IN THE OPENING moments of a *Gladiator 2* trailer, Barry Keoghan is shown in armour, staring into the distance. "I'll finish your quest for you," he promises via voiceover, before a spectacular battle sequence and rousing soundtrack kick in. Yet, despite it drawing over a million views on YouTube, this is no authorised preview for the Ridley Scott sequel (Keoghan is not even on the official cast list). Instead, it's the handiwork of a concept-trailer creator, who mashes together pre-existing movie footage with their own effects to make videos with a huge global reach.

"It's really quite complicated," says Screen Culture's Nikhil Chaudhari of the process. His channel, which was launched in 2018, puts out daily videos teasing everything from *Stranger Things*' fifth season to the non-existent 'Iron Man 4' for its 888,000 subscribers. A new concept trailer for *Ballerina*, the upcoming *John Wick* spin-off starring Ana de Armas, has garnered 144,000 views in just three days. Only a brief official synopsis has been released to date, but the short video blends clips from the Keanu Reeves-fronted franchise with action shots of de Armas from *The Gray Man* to show what a collaboration could look like.

"As we've grown, we've built a great team of over a dozen people, including editors, VFX creators and sound engineers," Chaudhari

explains. The money for this set-up comes from ad revenue and the channel's three paid membership tiers, whereby viewers pay up to \$19.99 a month for exclusive content and influence on the channel's output.

As most of the trailers are based on titles yet to be released and with little information readily available about them, teams need to get creative when it comes to plot. "We try to come up with a logical and original continuation of the story," explains Vladimir Grudkin, co-founder of Teaser PRO, which has 1.16 million subscribers. "If there are source materials, such as Marvel comics, we study them and figure out how to present the story." One trailer that posits what a standalone Miles Morales Spider-Man movie could look like, for example, charts his entire origin story.

The channels' collective work is achieving staggering results. Teaser PRO's trailer for *Squid Game* Season 2, which is largely remixed footage from Season 1, has garnered 33.9 million views to date. That 'Iron Man 4' trailer has 5.7 million views. Grudkin believes the response that these videos get could be useful to studios — even if they do keep hitting the channels with copyright-infringement notices, irked by these rogue additions to their marketing campaigns. "Copyright issues are a significant challenge," laments Grudkin. "We've had to delete a lot of content." But he suggests, "Concept trailers and their view-counts can serve as indicators of



**Top to bottom:** Saltburn's Barry Keoghan weapons up for *Gladiator 2* — despite not being in the actual film; Old(er) Harry Potter; 'Iron Man 4'?

whether audiences want to see such a movie."

And the scope for making these trailers only seems to be broadening. Developments in AI have been a sore point for Hollywood at large, especially when it comes to actors' likenesses, but Chaudhari sees it as an opportunity. "The future looks incredible, with advancements in deep fakes, VFX, and the ability to create natural dialogues for actors out of thin air," he says. A recent fan-made trailer for *Harry Potter And The Cursed Child*, for example, featuring AI-created versions of the film franchise's cast later in life, has received over 1.7 million views and widespread media attention.

One thing's for certain: this is no one-person-in-their-basement operation. Concept-trailer creators are presenting themselves as a collective who have made their multi-million-view mark on film fandom, and show no signs of slowing down. Are you not entertained?



# THE MONTHLY MIXTAP

**EMPIRE MIXMASTER  
AMON WARMANN SELECTS  
THIS MONTH'S  
ESSENTIAL TUNES**

**'I AM'  
STAN WALKER**

ORIGIN

A rousing, anthemic track which speaks to the themes of reclamation, reconnection and identity inherent in Ava DuVernay's biographical drama.

**'LIVE THAT WAY FOREVER'  
RICHARD REED PARRY &  
LAUREL SPRENGELMEYER**

THE IRON CLAW

Sung by Stanley Simons' Mike Von Erich in one of the wrestling biopic's best moments, this rocking track closes things out in fitting style.

**'BACK TO BLACK'  
AMY WINEHOUSE**

BACK TO BLACK (TRAILER)

The unmistakable vocals, personal and poignant lyrics and throwback sound make this Amy Winehouse's finest track.

**'EPIPHANY'  
TRENT REZNOR & ATTICUS ROSS**

SOUL

A new theatrical release for this Pixar gem means revisiting this moving piano melody that starts off simple and soft before a more elaborate but no less beautiful conclusion.

**'I GOT MY MOJO WORKING'  
JOYCE HARRIS & THE DAYLIGHTERS**

DRIVE-AWAY DOLLS (TRAILER)

There's a pop and energy to this swinging track which is perfectly utilised in the trailer for Ethan Coen's road-trip caper.

**LISTEN NOW! HEAD TO THE 'EMPIRE' SPOTIFY**

**ACCOUNT TO HEAR ALL OF THE ABOVE**



FIRST WORD



## THE FIGHT TO BRING GOTHAM A NEW KIND OF VILLAIN

**THE FILMMAKER BEHIND THE PEOPLE'S JOKER ON  
MAKING A PERSONAL PARODY IN DC'S WORLD**

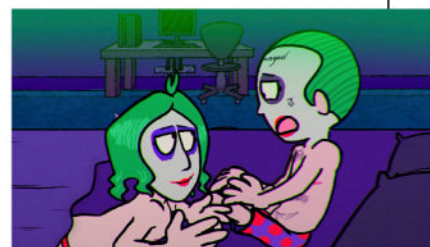
THERE IS A Joker movie due out this year you'll have heard of — *Joker: Folie À Deux*, from DC Films. But there is another Joker movie on the slate: *The People's Joker*, a chaotic mixed-media parody movie which re-imagines Batman's greatest foe as a trans woman in Gotham City embarking on a coming-of-age romance. Shot in just five days, it is totally unauthorised by DC — and was very nearly banned.

"This is every lawyer's favourite movie," Vera Drew, the film's star, writer, director and producer tells *Empire*, before deadpanning: "It was obviously my childhood dream to make a movie like that."

*The People's Joker* had its foundations in a "horror movie about a drag queen that was physically addicted to irony", eventually evolving into its current form: a "kind of DIY community project" in which over 100 artists contributed, telling its offbeat tale via live-action, animation, toys, N64-era video-game graphics, and more. There's even a musical number featuring an inter-dimensional puppet.

The collaboration was crowd-sourced, as was some of the budget, which was reported as being about \$100,000. "We put out that Bat-signal for all those people to come help out," Drew explains. "Somebody would send me a [design for a] Batmobile and be like, 'Does it look too much like a dick?' And I'd be like, 'No, it doesn't look *enough* like one!' That would be the process — just 'Yes-and'-ing each other into oblivion. And into a lot of debt."

It has not been an easy ride. Warner Bros., who own the cinematic rights to the Joker character, sent a lawyer's letter to the filmmakers on the eve of its Toronto premiere in 2022.



**Top to bottom:** Director/writer/actor/producer Vera Drew as Joker the Harlequin; *The Joker*, always joking around; An animated love scene by one of the many contributors to the film.

The film's prospects seemed to be lowered into a tank of chemical waste. "Then I got a text message from Tim Heidecker [of Tim and Eric fame, a co-star in the film], who I worked with for years, saying: 'Hey, look at all this free publicity!'"

Confident that the film falls under fair use and parody, Drew will finally release *The People's Joker* in the US later this year. She hopes it finds its audience. "I am addicted to comic-book movies," she says. "But the people who love this movie, and who really need it, they don't have superhero movies where characters are using they/them pronouns, or in T4T [trans-for-trans] relationships." Truly, Vera Drew is the unconventional hero Gotham deserves. **JOHN NUGENT**

**THE PEOPLE'S JOKER DOES NOT YET HAVE**

**A UK RELEASE DATE**



# The Spotlight Kathryn Newton

THE LISA FRANKENSTEIN  
STAR ON HOW HORROR HAS  
FOUND A PLACE IN HER HEART

WORDS BETH WEBB



SAM MCGUIRE

LAST OCTOBER, KATHRYN Newton had the kind of pinch-me moment that only Kathryn Newton could have. The actor was visiting Universal's Halloween Horror Nights in Hollywood, where her body-swap slasher *Freaky* had its own maze featuring extras dressed up as her weapon-wielding, serial killer-possessed character. "It was my version of having a Disney princess ride," she tells *Empire* happily.

Horror has been a constant presence throughout Newton's career, from her first leading movie role in 2012's *Paranormal Activity 4* to the upcoming *Abigail*, in which she plays a member of a criminal crew pitted against a ballerina vampire. Yet there's a twist: Newton is, in fact, a total scaredy-cat. She recalls her first frightening trip to the movies, where she watched the Diablo Cody-penned *Jennifer's Body*. "I was so scared that my popcorn was falling out of the bucket. I was shaking so much. And that movie is not even considered a horror film."

Cut to some 15 years later and Newton seems to have gotten over the experience, as she now stars in Cody's monster-movie comeback, *Lisa Frankenstein*. The '80s-set teen horror follows solitary Lisa, who accidentally resurrects a Victorian bachelor who will protect her honour at any brutal cost. He's also mute, meaning the film rests on Newton's amplified performance. "At the end of the day, what you want to do is something that scares you," she says. Armed with Cody's script, the actor and director Zelda Williams worked on creating something new and surreal inspired by the likes of *Beetlejuice* and *Edward Scissorhands*. "We're both alike in the way that we're bored of seeing the same kind of characters in the same kind of high school," she explains.



**Top and right:** Kathryn Newton, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in Los Angeles on 18 January 2024. **Far right:** As Lisa with her reanimated-corpse beau in *Lisa Frankenstein*.





## BETWEEN SCENES

OUR SPOTLIGHT STAR'S FAVOURITE STUFF

## THE SHOW GIRLS

"I just did a rewatch. I'm obsessed with *Girls*, and I think being older now [means] it makes a lot more sense to me. I wrote down every book that Hannah — Lena Dunham's character — reads, and I just bought all of them."

## THE PODCAST SMARTLESS

"I love [this podcast] with Jason Bateman, Sean Hayes and Will Arnett."

## THE ALBUM TATTOO YOU BY THE ROLLING STONES

"I like [Mick Jagger]'s songs about love. And it's easy to dance to."

Newton's appetite for trying new things has grown over a particularly long career for a 26-year-old. She was just four when she landed her first job — an HBO short film called *Bun Bun*. "I didn't even say my lines half the time. I just thought I was dressing up," she laughs. Over the years on set, from her stints in horror to supporting roles in *Lady Bird* and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, Newton worked on making her performances more authentic. Even when she was acting opposite tennis balls for *Ant-Man And The Wasp: Quantumania*, where she played Paul Rudd's on-screen daughter, Cassie Lang. "Trying to be grounded was definitely the biggest challenge," she confirms. "Because we're on a big Volume stage and I'm looking at somebody dressed in a grey onesie and he's making weird alien noises and I'm supposed to not laugh. It was very difficult for me."

Further plans for Cassie Lang within the MCU are unconfirmed, but if she were to get a Nick Fury-style recruitment call for more adventures, Newton says she would be excited. "I started watching those movies when I was eight years old. So they're a big part of my life. Honestly, one of the biggest goals of my career was to be a Marvel superhero," she says, before adding, "I would do it forever if I could." And her dream Avengers co-star? "My instinct is Hailee Steinfeld [*Hawkeye's* Kate Bishop]," she muses.

It's safe to say that no matter how excited Newton might be for that call, she's certainly not waiting around for it. She's got vampire ballerinas to fight and undead bachelors to deal with. As scaredy-cats go, this one can sure handle a few monsters.

LISA FRANKENSTEIN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 1 MARCH

Make-up: Gina Brooke at VME Fashion; using Gina Brooke Beauty. Hair: Ericka Verrett at A-Frame using Roz Hair. Styling: Christopher Campbell at De Facto Inc. Clothing: Main: Cashmere sweater, Lafayette 148; Corsat dress; Paola Estefania; Earrings: Goshwara at Roseark; Pink gold rings and bracelet, Selim Mouzannar; white gold and diamond rings. Azlee; Buckle ballerinas, Roger Vivier. Drop-in: Crop-top, trousers and belt, Michael Kors Collection; Tourmaline, yellow sapphire and diamond rings and earrings, Selim Mouzannar; Necklaces and pinky ring, Azlee; White gold bracelet, Dauphin; Buckles slingbacks, Belle Vivier.



## HOW MAN COULD CREATE MORE DINOSAURS

WITH A NEW, DAVID KOEPP-PENNED JURASSIC WORLD FILM ANNOUNCED, TEAM EMPIRE PREDICT WHERE THE FRANCHISE COULD GO NEXT

## Ben Travis (Deputy Online Editor):

This film will surely have to continue with a world where dinosaurs and humans are living together, which was set up in the new trilogy but not fully explored. Or they have to completely reboot the franchise and ignore everything that's ever happened in it.

**Nick de Semlyen (Editor):** The tricky thing that they have to contend with is that these aren't big *kaiju* films with humans battling dinosaurs. Right from the original film they established that these are animals rather than monsters, so you can't have, say, a tank fighting a T-Rex. I quite like the idea of 'Jurassic Galaxy'. It's too dangerous to have a park on Earth, so send all the dinosaurs to space.

**Ben:** 'Jurassic Planet' would be mad. I want them to stay Earthbound, though.

**Beth Webb (News Editor):** They've already gone underwater. They can only go up. And we don't think that any pre-existing cast members are returning for this?

**Nick:** There's a successful *Jurassic World* animated series on Netflix — *Camp Cretaceous* — that skews quite young and has kids in it. So they

could potentially refresh the franchise by having a younger cast in it. They've had kids in the live-action films, but never fully gone in that direction.

**John Nugent (Reviews Editor):**

I want to see a paleontologically correct dinosaur with feathers.

**Ben:** They started to introduce feathers in the later movies.

**John:** I want more feathers.

**Ben:** John wants a six-foot turkey.

**Nick:** Who do we want to see directing it?

**Ben:** Given that David Koepp [pictured below] is coming back, who wrote the first two films, nothing would excite me more than Steven Spielberg coming back. I know it's a long shot.

**Nick:** I've crunched the numbers with Mr. DNA and there's 0.00001 per cent chance of that happening.

This guy also has a lot going on, but I'd love to see James Cameron do a *Jurassic* film because he came close to directing the original.

**Ben:** Dan Trachtenberg, who made *Prey*, would be great at bringing back the tension and the fear, I think.

**John:** Does it have to have a giant budget?

**Nick:** Maybe this is what Ken Loach comes out of retirement for.

**John:** 'Jurassic Gateshead'.







# When two titans team up

**GODZILLA X KONG: THE NEW EMPIRE IS ABOUT TO TAKE AN UNLIKELY DOUBLE-ACT TO THE NEXT LEVEL**

WORDS **BEN TRAVIS**

LET'S GET ONE thing straight: Godzilla and Kong aren't exactly best mates. In 2021's royal rumble *Godzilla vs. Kong*, they knocked seven bells out of each other before begrudgingly uniting to battle Mechagodzilla. But with villainous mega-primate Skar King bringing the

thunder in *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire*, returning director Adam Wingard explains how the MonsterVerse's headlining heroes are joining forces — and upping their game together.

## **GODZILLA**

"Godzilla's going through an evolution," states Wingard. Case in point: that brand-new pink palette, part homage to "the colourful, outlandish Showa[-era]" films, part personal pick from the filmmaker. "Pink's just my favourite colour, to be honest," he says. "Our editorial room has pink Christmas lights."

*GxK* (as Wingard calls it) offered a chance to reinvent the character's look. The transformation will be more than skin-deep, though. "He's going to have to level up in order to take on this new threat," the director teases. "We get a little preview of what Godzilla has probably done in the past — the way that he can absorb things, and renew himself and bulk himself up."

Are we in for the *kaiju* equivalent of a *Rocky IV* montage? "This is his version of a training routine," says Wingard. "I'm really big into Shaw Brothers martial arts. Those films are always about, 'Here's a big threat, and you have to do all these things to pump yourself up so that you can take on that threat.'" Prepare for the ultimate glow-up. "You're gonna see lots of different versions of Godzilla in this movie," Wingard hints.

## **KONG**

In *Godzilla vs. Kong*, Skull Island's finest was arguably its reluctant lead — grouching his way into that Godzilla grudge-match with big grumpy-old-man energy. Despite the evenly balanced title of the new film, Kong remains

the emotional heavy-lifter. "There's a personal journey that Kong's going through," says Wingard. "He's the hero of this franchise in a lot of ways — he's the surrogate of the human characters and he has a full range of emotions in the same way that the humans do."

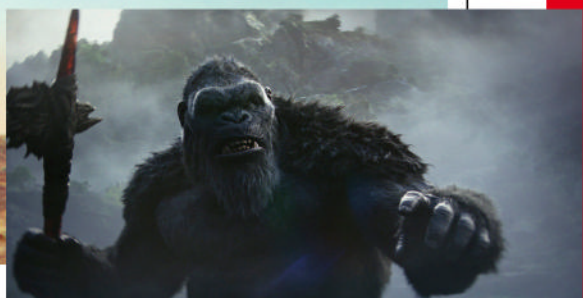
While Kong will have to face a fellow ape-shaped Titan in the form of Skar King — "really this evil dictator-type character that lusts for power" — he's also battling something more painful: one hell of a toothache. "Kong goes through a lot of things that were very cathartic for me to express through him in this film. On [2011 slasher film] *You're Next*, I had a really bad toothache the whole time. It was a very traumatic experience. There's a really fun sub-plot in this movie where Kong has a toothache as well — we show that being dealt with in very interesting ways, to say the least."

## **GODZILLA X KONG**

True to its streetwear-collab-aping title, *Godzilla x Kong* is all about the team-up. "There's a bit of a truce — Godzilla's in control of the surface world and Kong is down in Hollow Earth," explains Wingard. But the duo's alliance won't be easy. After all, *GvK*'s finale was far from a 'Did we just become best friends?' moment. "It wasn't, 'Okay, give me a call when something goes wrong, Kong. And I, Godzilla, will rush to the rescue!'"

Instead, their alliance is somewhat forced — with chalk-and-cheese chemistry derived from cinema's finest. "The buddy-cop dysfunctional relationship dynamic is probably the best one to describe Godzilla and Kong," says Wingard, citing *Lethal Weapon* as a particular favourite. "My influences are always embedded within the





**Clockwise from left:** New amigos Godzilla and Kong; Terror rising from the depths; Trapper (Dan Stevens), Dr Ilene Andrews (Rebecca Hall) and Jia (Kaylee Hottle); Kong on alert.

'80s, and the '80s were prime for [that] storyline." At least Riggs and Murtaugh could *talk* to each other, though. No such luck for Godzilla and Kong. "There's a lot of misunderstandings — the way that the monsters communicate isn't straightforward." But through punches, grunts, and knowing nods, the *kaiju* are firmly in the driving seat here. Time to go beast mode.

**GODZILLA X KONG: THE NEW EMPIRE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 29 MARCH**



# THE MAKING OF A LUCRATIVE LIZARD

**TAKASHI YAMAZAKI ON HOW THE TINY-BUDGETED GODZILLA MINUS ONE CAME TO WIN A FORTUNE AND OSCAR RECOGNITION**

SEVENTY YEARS INTO his screen career, Godzilla remains a monster box-office draw. While the US MonsterVerse franchise continues to evolve, original Japanese studio Toho has conquered the world with its latest homegrown film, *Godzilla Minus One* — an international hit that's received unanimous acclaim, a worldwide haul north of \$100 million, and even earned an Oscar nomination. "Right now, I'm finally feeling a little bit of relief," its director, writer and visual-effects supervisor Takashi Yamazaki tells *Empire*. "For the longest time in my career, I was the director who wanted

to make a *Godzilla* film. Now I've become the director who has made a *Godzilla* film." And it only cost a reported \$15 million — perhaps even less, as Yamazaki has hinted on X. "I don't know if I can go into specifics," he says, but concedes that while it's "pretty top-tier" for a Japanese studio, it "isn't a big Hollywood-style budget".

Yamazaki's vision to recapture "that fear factor" of Godzilla himself ("part beast, part God" says the director), while also spinning the compelling human story of guilt-ridden kamikaze pilot Shikishima (Ryunosuke Kamiki), has captured audiences across the globe. "I've got feedback that

there's a significant amount of human drama that's well balanced in *Godzilla Minus One*, and that was something I was very conscious of during the creative process," he says. "It makes me realise that this film was worth making."

Given the response, hopes for a sequel are high. "I would certainly like to see what the sequel would look like," Yamazaki says, noting that nothing is greenlit yet. But he's "very curious" about where Shikishima and his partner Noriko (Minami Hamabe) go next. "I know that Shikishima's war seems over, and we've reached this state of peace and calm — but perhaps [it's the] calm before the storm, and the characters have not yet been forgiven for what has been imposed upon them," the filmmaker warns. Could more classic *kaiju* emerge? Yamazaki — sat in front of a wall of Toho toys — won't be drawn on specifics, but seems intrigued by the possibilities. "I don't know that anyone has pulled off a more serious tone of *kaiju*-versus-*kaiju* with human drama, and that challenge is something that I'd like to explore."

For now, awards season beckons. Yet with *Godzilla Minus One's* success, Yamazaki's already a winner. "I've already experienced the dream that I was going for," he says. "I've received all the awards I can." Go, go, Godzilla.

**BEN TRAVIS**

## MONSTERS, INC.

**ADAM WINGARD AND TAKASHI YAMAZAKI ASSESS EACH OTHER'S KAIJU CAPERS**

**ADAM WINGARD  
ON *GODZILLA MINUS ONE***

"It was fantastic. It's one of the best *Godzilla* movies I've ever seen. Their take on *Godzilla* is so different than mine — I'm following the later '60s, '70s Showa pattern, where *Godzilla* is this hero character. In *Minus One*, *Godzilla* reacts in a way that's metaphorical to what the characters are going through. It's such a different movie than ours, tonally. You're getting more *Godzilla* now than ever, but you're seeing all sides of him. It's really super-cool."

**TAKASHI YAMAZAKI  
ON THE MONSTERVERSE**

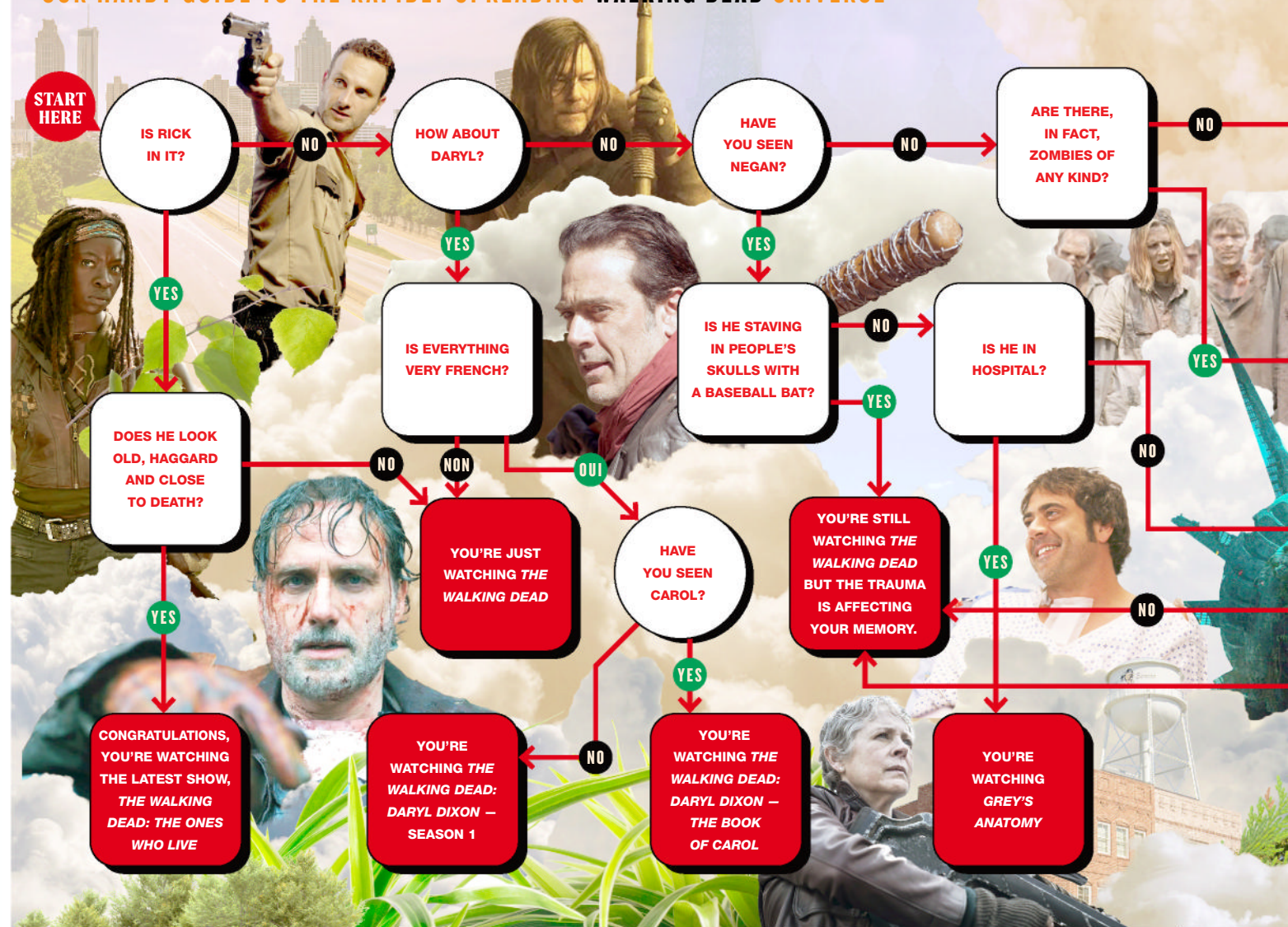
"The Hollywood interpretation of *Godzilla* is a very interesting use of the IP. It can endure and survive many different interpretations. To me, it's a more fun [version] of what *Godzilla* can be — the classic Toho version did explore something like that at one point in its history. Within that genre, I think they do a good job of [balancing] what the humans do, versus what the *kaiju* are doing."





# Which zombie show are you watching?

OUR HANDY GUIDE TO THE RAPIDLY SPREADING WALKING DEAD UNIVERSE



## THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS JORDAN KING

### PLAY DIRTY

**LaKeith Stanfield** has joined Mark Wahlberg as the co-lead in Shane Black's crime thriller. The film, based on Donald E. Westlake's *Parker* novels, follows Wahlberg's professional thief and Stanfield's actor and conman as they take on various foes. It's due to begin filming early this year.



### HONEY, DON'T

**Aubrey Plaza** will star alongside Margaret Qualley and Chris Evans in *Drive-Away Dolls* director Ethan Coen's next picture. Plot details are hush-hush thus far, but the film — co-written by Coen with long-time collaborator and wife Tricia Cooke — is reportedly a *Dolls*-esque comedy. Honey, yes!

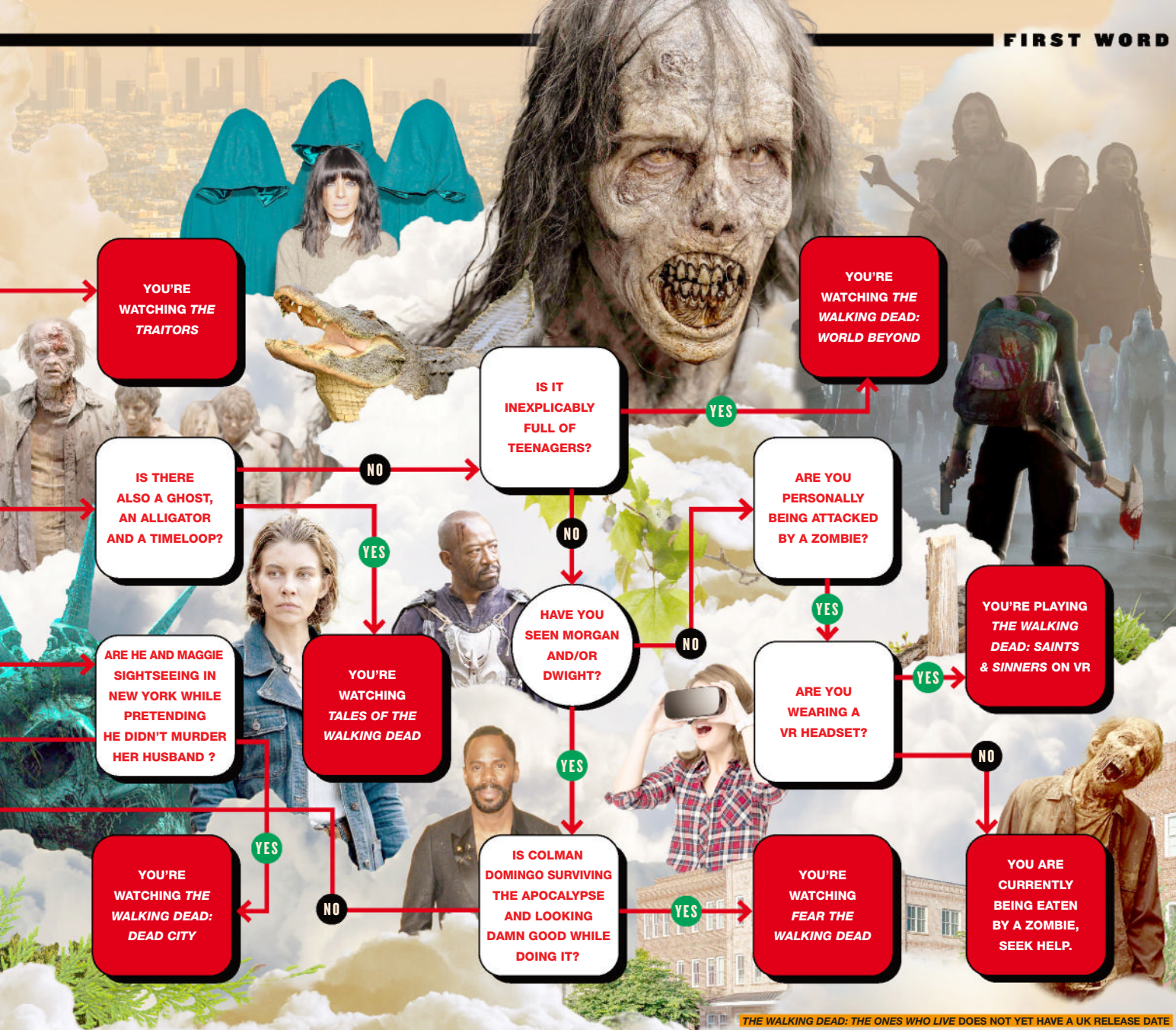


### ANIMALS

Long-time creative partners and lifelong besties Ben Affleck and **Matt Damon** are re-teaming for a new Netflix-bound crime thriller, with the former directing the latter à la 2023's *Air*. This latest team-up centres around a mayoral candidate's (Damon) desperate efforts to save his kidnapped son.







## THE ROOM NEXT DOOR

**Julianne Moore** has joined the cast of legendary Spanish auteur Pedro Almodóvar's first English-language feature. Enigmatically described as a mother and daughter drama, the film — which will see Moore appear opposite Tilda Swinton — is due to begin shooting this spring in New York and Madrid.

## HUNTINGTON

**Glen Powell** has landed the lead role in *Emily The Criminal* writer-director John Patton Ford's latest. A revenge thriller inspired by Ealing's comedy classic *Kind Hearts And Coronets*, this one follows multi-billion-dollar heir Beckett Redfellow (Powell) as he chases what he believes is rightfully his.

## BLACK BAG

Ocean's mastermind Steven Soderbergh is gearing up for a new UK-based spy thriller. Past collaborators **Cate Blanchett** (*The Good German*) and Michael Fassbender (*Haywire*) are to star, with David Koepp — writer of Soderbergh's upcoming haunted-house thriller *Presence* — handling the script.

## THE BOOK OF ELI PREQUEL SERIES

**John Boyega** will play a younger version of Denzel Washington's titular nomad in a prequel series set 30 years before the Hughes brothers' 2010 neo-Western. Details on the show are scarce, but its setting does align with the origin of the film's atomic war.

## TRON: ARES

Gillian's headed for the Grid! Yes, **Gillian Anderson** has boarded Joachim Ronning's long-awaited, finally shooting *Tron* threequel. She joins a starry ensemble including Greta Lee and Jodie Turner-Smith for the film, which will see Jared Leto's digital character Ares crossing over into the real world.





# A personal journey through past lives

LÉA SEYDOUX ON HOW SHE TAMED THE BEAST'S AMBITIOUS PREMISE

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

*THE BEAST* IS the kind of vast, conceptual movie that defies loglines. Set across three eras — 1910, 2014 and 2044 — the film wrestles with themes of love, death, reincarnation and fear. Even its star, Léa Seydoux, has to take a pause when summing it up. “This is the first time that I’m speaking about this, so you need to be patient,” she laughs.

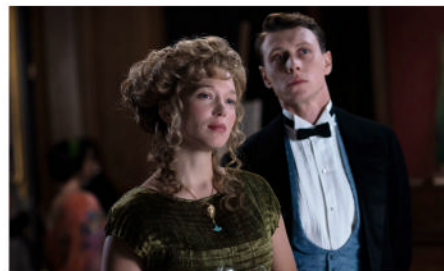
The film — directed by Seydoux’s long-standing collaborator Bertrand Bonello — is loosely adapted from Henry James’ *The Beast In The Jungle*. The novella follows a man whose life is dominated by the fear of something terrible happening to him. It’s a fear embodied by Seydoux’s Gabrielle, who travels through her past lives in a bid to cleanse her DNA of emotion to secure work in the future, where feelings are condemned and unemployment is high. “It’s really based on the fear you can have when you fall in love,” Seydoux summarises. “It’s a pure sentiment that feels universal to me.”

The subject of Gabrielle’s affections (and fear) is Louis, who she encounters in various forms throughout her timeline. Gaspard Ulliel had originally been billed as Seydoux’s co-star, with George MacKay stepping in after the French

actor tragically died during pre-production. “It was easy to fall in love with him,” says Seydoux of MacKay, who learned fluent French for the role and in turn helped with her English, since the film pivots between the two languages.

The pair are not only transported through different eras but different genres: their 1910s emotional affair plays out as a romantic drama, 2044 a minimalist sci-fi. In their 2014 chapter, Gabrielle is an aspiring Hollywood actor who is stalked, slasher-style, by MacKay’s embittered incel. Seydoux herself was reaching worldwide acclaim at the time, after *Blue Is The Warmest Colour* had won the Palme d’Or at Cannes the year before. Inevitably, she found herself reflecting on Hollywood at the time during shooting. “It was before the #MeToo movement, so it [was] very interesting. That’s why [Bonello] wanted to set the film in this period,” she says. “I feel now, as an actor, it really is a new era. I’ve known a world that no longer exists.”

During its world premiere at the Venice Film Festival, Bonello said of the film: “I wanted *The Beast* to be both a film about a woman and about the actor who embodies her.” Seydoux agrees that there is a documentary-like quality to the film, in spite of its otherworldly premise. “A friend of mine said, ‘You know, it’s funny, Léa,



**Top to bottom:** A woman on the edge of time: Gabrielle (Léa Seydoux) in 2044; The 1910s, where she meets her beau Louis (George MacKay); And the present (in fact, 2014), with her companion, played by Guslagie Malanda.

because when you [act] in a film, you very quickly become the subject,” muses Seydoux. She may not be a suppressed Parisian woman in 1910, nor an inhabitant of the future, but Seydoux has headed into the belly of *The Beast*, and emerged intact.

**THE BEAST IS IN CINEMAS FROM 31 MAY**



# A TALE OF TWO STEVES

**THE FILMMAKER BEHIND STEVE! (MARTIN): A DOCUMENTARY IN 2 PIECES ON HIS QUEST TO UNLOCK A COMEDY GENIUS**

TO GET UNDER the skin of former wild and crazy guy Steve Martin, documentarian Morgan Neville (*20 Feet From Stardom*) wanted to chart both his emergence as a stand-up superstar and his life today. "I just kept thinking, 'These things feel different,'" he says, "'so why don't I let them be different?'" Rather than one film, the result is *Steve! (Martin): A Documentary In 2 Pieces*. Here's how Neville used two distinct methods to find the 'real' Steve Martin.

## THEN

Part One deals with Martin's rise as a comedian. For Neville, "It was this isolated, archival story of this man in time," inspiring the filmmaker to document this period of Martin's life through old clips and voiceover. Starting with hours of in-person audio interviews with Martin, Neville worked on the project with the star for two-and-a-half years. "The thing that made the difference for me was that Steve was really willing to go there — our conversations just got deeper and deeper."

For this first section, Neville scanned 5,000 items from Martin's personal archive and trawled through reams of unseen visual material. "We found footage Steve filmed himself doing stand-up to an early video camera. It was like reading a diary — he's trying to figure out who he



is on camera." When Martin hit the big time aged 30, he was riddled with anxiety, panic attacks and loneliness. Neville calls it "that journey of having all the success you've ever dreamed of and realising 'Oh, this didn't make me happy.'"

## NOW

As such, Part Two is what Neville calls "the pursuit of happiness". With a crew following Martin, now 78, around today, Neville attempted to "get a feel for who Steve is now". This access-all-areas approach charts a new-found openness after, Neville says, "Steve realised the biggest problem he had to solve was himself."

The director also documents how the 'lonely guy' of Part One has now surrounded himself with people (including a wife and child), giving particular emphasis to Martin's relationship with Martin Short. "Steve is really reserved," observes Neville. "Marty has none of that, so he just helps liberate Steve from being in his own

**Left:** Footage of Steve Martin doing stand-up when he first started out.

**Below:** A more contented Martin as he is now.

**Bottom:** The young Martin, playing an unsuccessful game of Solitaire.



head." Ironically, Neville's film puts you *inside* Martin's head, a complex but now contented space that needs two films to do it justice. **IAN FREER**

**STEVE! (MARTIN) A DOCUMENTARY IN 2 PIECES IS ON APPLE TV+ FROM 29 MARCH**

## ON OUR MINDS

**DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE WARPED MINDS OF TEAM EMPIRE**

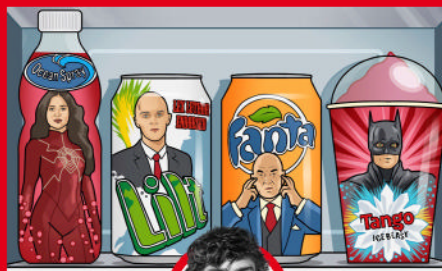
 **BILL McCONKEY**



**BEN TRAVIS IS THINKING ABOUT... FRIZZLE THE CHICKEN**

As a child of the 'Chicken Run Generation', I couldn't wait to see Rocky and Ginger again.

But the real MVP of *Dawn Of The Nugget?* Incoming Scouse icon Frizzle. Fun, loyal — that chicken is just pure good vibes. "Zip it, kidda!"



**JOHN NUGENT IS THINKING ABOUT... MADAME WEB'S ODD COSTUME DEBUT**

Dakota Johnson's Madame Web superhero costume was first revealed on a promotional bottle of Ocean Spray. What next? The new Batman cowl unveiled on a Tangelo Ice Blast? Lex Luthor's latest look on a Lilt? Professor X on a Fanta?



**BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT... WILLEM DAFOE'S ALPACAS**

He's played a Spider-Man supervillain and a flatulent lighthouse-keeper, but my favourite Willem Dafoe role is off screen, as a self-labelled "gentleman farmer" with a handful of alpacas under his care. I hear they're big fans of *Antichrist*.



A young girl with long brown hair, wearing a white tutu and a crown with a feather, is in a room. She has fangs and is looking towards the camera. The room has a yellow wall and a lamp with a patterned shade. The title "A pirouetting punisher makes her debut" is overlaid on the image.

# A pirouetting punisher makes her debut

**ABIGAIL FILMMAKERS MATT BETTINELLI-OLPIN AND TYLER GILLETT ON CREATING THEIR NEW UNIVERSAL MONSTER MOVIE**

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

BEFORE THE TRAILER dropped for the new film from impish horror filmmaking duo Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett (collectively known as Radio Silence), precious little was known about it, other than it was a monster movie made by Universal Pictures. Which got tongues wagging about the nature of said monster. Was it a werewolf? A Creature From The Black Lagoon? And then, about a minute into *Abigail*'s preview footage, the matter was somewhat settled as its seemingly sweet title character reveals a mouth filled with fangs. "We kidnapped a fucking vampire," says Melissa Barrera, before Kathryn Newton's character adds the all-important capper: "A ballerina vampire!"

Yes, folks, *Abigail* is about a young ballerina — played by *Matilda*'s Alisha Weir — who turns out to be a vampire, much to the chagrin of the criminals who are brought together to kidnap and babysit her for 24 hours. "In the opening scene she was at a ballet class," explains Bettinelli-Olpin of her protagonist's favourite pastime, "and it

was kind of a part of the character. But once we met Alisha, she was like, 'I'm really good at dancing,' and it became, 'Ooh, let's steer into that. Let's make that part of the identity of the movie.'"

And so now *Abigail* is in full-blown ballerina garb for the entire movie, pirouetting her way through the gang with wild abandon. "It just felt like, 'This is the iconic feel of the movie,'" adds Gillett. "The imagery is this young girl, in a tutu, covered in blood because she's been on a killing spree. Our goal is always to find and design a character that feels like, 'Ooh, fuck, that's gonna be a cool Halloween costume.'"

As well as Barrera, reteaming with Gillett and Bettinelli-Olpin after *Screams 5* and *6*, and Newton, the kidnappers who find themselves on *Abigail*'s menu include Dan Stevens, the late Angus Cloud, and Giancarlo Esposito. The directors are loath, this far from release, to say too much, but they promise more than mere cannon-fodder. "Everybody in this movie has done a bad thing," says Bettinelli-Olpin. "There are no good characters. But there are different moments where your allegiance might shift."

The focus, though, is on *Abigail*, who looks set to follow in *M3GAN*'s footsteps as a horror anti-hero you might just find yourself rooting for, even as she's doing unspeakable things.

"With Alisha, right off the bat, you meet her and you want to take care of her," says Gillett. "She's so kind and warm and innocent-seeming, and we knew that the more we could sell that, the more fun that turn would be. And that influenced the look and feel of her throughout the movie, that you watch that deteriorate and become something more gruesome and terrifying and violent and scary."

One rumour going around about the film is that it's loosely inspired by *Dracula's Daughter*, a 1936 Universal monster movie which neatly sidestepped Bela Lugosi's absence by recruiting Gloria Holden as his offspring. And, certainly, there are plenty of questions about *Abigail* that are still to be answered: might her father, in fact, be *Dracula*? Might this be a Universal Monster movie, after all? "I mean, it is, insofar as it's a movie about a monster that is being made and distributed at Universal," laughs Gillett,



# NEED TO KNOW

GET UP TO SPEED ON  
GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S **FRANKENSTEIN**



## IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME COMING

Del Toro has been trying to make a *Frankenstein* film happen for years.

The Mexican fabulist and lifelong *Frankenstein* superfan first struck a deal to adapt Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's Promethean tale with Universal back in 2008. Then, after ultimately swerving that 'Dark Universe'-shaped bullet, del Toro resurrected the project in 2013 with Benedict Cumberbatch mooted to star. Now, a decade later, Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* is finally heading to Netflix. The cast assembled in late January in Toronto, putting out a group photo from a restaurant. IT'S ALIIIIIVE!!!

## IT WON'T BE LIKE BRANAGH'S FRANKENSTEIN

For starters, del Toro publicly promised back in 2008 that, "Compared to Kenneth Branagh, I will not appear shirtless in the movie!" And, though plot details for this new adaptation remain shrouded in secrecy, the filmmaker's subversive spin on *Creature From The Black Lagoon* with 2017's *The Shape Of Water* suggests that he will take a more, err, novel approach than Branagh here.

## IT'S GOT A BUZZY CAST

A starry ensemble is bringing del Toro's passion project to life. In-demand *Saltburn* and *Priscilla* star Jacob Elordi will play Frankenstein's monster, having recently taken over the role from Andrew Garfield. He'll be joined by Oscar Isaac

as Victor Frankenstein and Mia Goth as, reportedly, the Bride. Del Toro alumni Christoph Waltz and David Bradley (*Pinocchio*) are also aboard, along with Felix Kammerer (*All Quiet On The Western Front*), Lars Mikkelsen (*Ahsoka*), and Christian Convery (*Sweet Tooth*), all in undisclosed roles.

## IT COULD SHOOT PARTLY IN SCOTLAND

Back in spring 2023, del Toro tweeted a selfie whilst checking out the Gothic architecture of Edinburgh alongside the vague caption, "Scouting for locations..." Now, we're no master sleuths, but GdT visiting a key location from Shelley's novel just before announcing that his *Frankenstein* film is finally happening doesn't feel like a coincidence. Also, Scotland — Orkney, to be exact — is where the monster's companion (the Bride) is created in the book.

## IT'S GOING TO BE EMOTIONAL

At its core, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is — like del Toro's own recent *Pinocchio* (and 2021's *Nightmare Alley*) — a story of "imperfect fathers, imperfect sons, love, and loss". Given the director's longtime producer J. Miles Dale has described this adaptation as "the third film in Guillermo's father trilogy", expect it to be as heartfelt as it is horrifying. So, a classic Guillermo del Toro film, then. **JORDAN KING**

**GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S FRANKENSTEIN DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

**Left:** Dancing fiend: Abigail (Alisha Weir) is not just good at ballet. **Below:** Once she wakes, Abigail's kidnappers are in for a horrifying surprise. **Bottom:** Biting back: young vampire Abigail is having a fangtastic time getting her revenge.



maintaining radio silence on that to the end. "The script was something that had existed at Universal in one iteration and we got our hands on it. As worried as people are about it being IP, the feature is this: it's just a wildly bizarre and fun and original take on a vampire story."

Sounds like it could well be on point.

**ABIGAIL IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 APRIL**





# On A Role

## LAKEITH STANFIELD AS TWINS CLARENCE & THOMAS

THE ACTOR GETS BIBLICAL (TWICE) IN OFFBEAT GOSPEL DRAMA *THE BOOK OF CLARENCE*

WORDS TSHEPO MOKOENA

### THE PLAYLIST

Jeymes Samuel's high-energy Biblical epic swivels the spotlight in Jerusalem from Jesus to LaKeith Stanfield's Clarence, a non-believer who fashions himself into a false prophet for financial gain. Stanfield also plays Clarence's twin brother, apostle Doubting Thomas, and used a playlist curated by Samuel (who composed the film's score) to build the characters. "[It] helped me figure out sonically the kind of world that we'd be living in with the film," Stanfield tells *Empire*. Samuel included songs like 'Ain't No Time Fa Nothing' by The Futures, 'Cool Cat' by Queen and Hans Zimmer scores, before Stanfield added 'Lotus Flower' by



**Top:** LaKeith Stanfield as Clarence (left) and twin Thomas (right). **Middle:** Battling Omar Sy's gladiator Barabbas. **Above:** Marvin Gaye (left) and Radiohead's 'Lotus Flower' (right).

Radiohead, "a little bit of Fela Kuti and some Marvin Gaye". In his trailer every morning, Stanfield would also play his own music: "Always something instrumental, because I feel like lyrics get in the way of the flow state I want to achieve."

### THE DUALITY

One distinction between the brothers is their hair: Thomas has an afro while Clarence's is twisted in locs. "This movie is Jeymes' brainchild, so I said Clarence's hair should mirror his dreads in homage," says Stanfield, who previously worked with the filmmaker on *The Harder They Fall*. The two characters share a number of emotionally fraught interactions, so in those scenes Stanfield would count the

seconds in his head, estimating how long he'd take to deliver a line in the other role, and then react accordingly. "I had to time all of it perfectly, which was interesting, challenging and also quite fun," he remembers.

### THE TRAINING

A gladiator-style fight scene opposite Omar Sy required several weeks of combat training. "I was being suspended from wires, learning how to operate from those while being thrown around in the air," Stanfield says. "I had to be in shape, you know?" The cast and crew shot on location in the ancient Italian stone city of Matera: while Stanfield rehearsed on a padded floor, "when we were shooting there were moments when I landed on the ground for real".

### THE HISTORY

In the New Testament, Thomas' name translates from Aramaic into "the twin", but Clarence doesn't appear. So rather than "appeal to the Bible", Stanfield spoke to Samuel about the script's historical context. "I realised this isn't really a story about the Bible or about Jesus — it's about a common man who saw what Jesus was doing, and thought that he might be able to use that to his advantage. It's about someone who would find, over time, that his own selfishness led to his downfall." That pulled him into the mindset of both siblings. "I did a lot of that initial work privately — that's how I tend to approach things. I retreat and figure out what deeper spiritual journey the role is gonna call for me to go on." The film made Stanfield reflect on family, power and religion — and how selflessness can strengthen them all. And if he learned how to swing a sword in the process, that can be chalked up as a bonus.

**THE BOOK OF CLARENCE DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**



# THE LAST OF LARRY

**THE COMEDY ICON SPEAKS EXCLUSIVELY ABOUT CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM'S FINAL SEASON**

LARRY DAVID IS a sweetheart. The real Larry, that is, not the misanthropic version at the centre of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, now in its 12th and final season. While that character of Larry is a genius of social disruption, the actual Larry, speaking to *Empire* over Zoom from his office in Los Angeles, is disarmingly relaxed and affable, sitting in front of book-shelves full of memorabilia, including a *Seinfeld* clapperboard. This writer/creator Larry puts his fictional counterpart through some extraordinary extremes in this swansong season, even by *Curb* standards. "I enjoy anything that I find funny," says David, explaining his *raison d'être*. "I love yelling at people. I love people yelling at me. Nothing makes me laugh harder than people cursing me. I can't get through scenes when people call me a 'fucking asshole' and all that. So, I'm pretty much game to do anything if it makes me laugh."

Proof of that yelling-and-cursing love comes in a standout moment in this season's opener, when Larry gets furious with Siri. "Oh, yeah, well, that happened," David confirms. "I think it was on a Sunday. And it happened in my car. I was in a hurry. And then I came into work the next day when we were shooting and I said to Jeff Schaffer, our director, 'Hey, we gotta do this thing that happened yesterday. We've got to film this.' And so we filmed it the



**Top to bottom:** King of comedy: Larry David is back being awkward; Larry with Auntie Rae (Ellia English); Up to mischief with Leon Black (J.B. Smoove).

next day. And then we liked it so much, we decided to put it in show one." So, real Larry got so angry that he called Siri a "fucking cunt"? "Yes, yes, I did," he nods proudly.

*Curb's* legacy is made up of countless classic and quotable scenes, but David has a particular favourite. He remembers 'The Ski Lift' from Season 5, in which Larry pretends to be an Orthodox Jew in order to get his friend Richard Lewis a kidney. "The scene where I'm doing the Hebrew gibberish — that's one of my favourite scenes. And I like the scene outside the Palestinian restaurant [from Season 8's 'Palestinian Chicken'] talking to Funkhouser — played by the late, great Bob Einstein, who passed away."

Real Larry looks wistful for a moment, in a way fictional Larry rarely does. But boy, that other Larry will be missed... **BOYD HILTON**

**CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM SEASON 12 IS NOW AIRING ON SKY COMEDY/NOW**

## THE BUCKET LIST

**A WHISTLE-STOP TOUR OF THE WILDEST, WEIRDEST POPCORN-HOLDERS IN CINEMA HISTORY**



### ALIEN

**TOY STORY**

Their fixation on the Claw may be their definitive trait, but these three-eyed Martians' perfect proportions and massive mouths can also contain ample portions of popcorn. When it comes to your confectionery needs, you've got a friend in them.



### R2-D2

**STAR WARS**

When he's not delivering hologram messages, this awesome astromech apparently doubles up as a provider of your movie munchies. This may not have been the droid you were looking for, but with his detachable head and tasty insides, he's probably a better one.



### JIGSAW

**SAW**

You may not want to play a game with the trap-loving puppet made famous by the *Saw* franchise, but you can eat delicious buttery corn products out of his hollowed-out head thanks to this significantly cuter container.



### SANDWORM

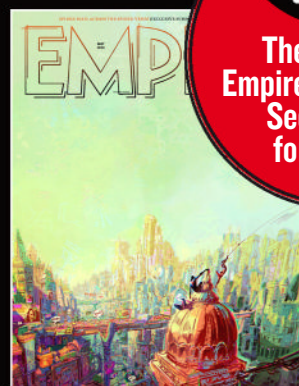
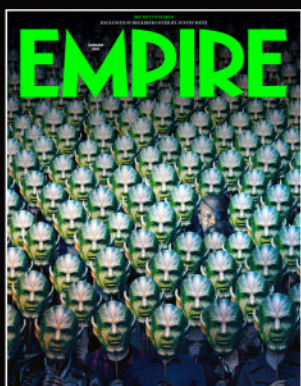
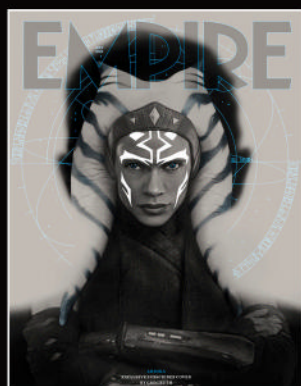
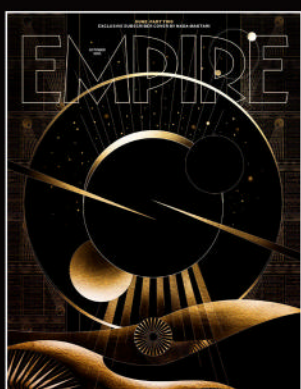
**DUNE: PART TWO**

This sandworm-shaped receptacle recently sent the internet into a frenzy with its questionable, somewhat impractical tentacle-fringed opening. An affront to Arrakis, or a vessel worthy of Spice Melange-coated snacks? **BETH WEBB**



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SCAN HERE





# How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

## Giancarlo Esposito

NEMESIS OF WALTER WHITE.  
SCOURGE OF GROGU.  
AMBIVALENT TO DAIRY

WORDS HAYLEY CAMPBELL



### What's the best advice you've ever been given?

I was 13, and George C. Scott snuck up on me after a performance on Broadway. I was doing *Seesaw*. He was doing *Uncle Vanya*. I was in the middle of an interview afterwards in the theatre restaurant, and he came up behind me — this big man with all this weight on my back, whispering in my ear. He was kind of toasted. And he said, [puts on a gruff George C. Scott voice], "Don't do it. Don't do it!" I go, "Who is this guy behind me?" The interviewer, her mouth had dropped open, she was staring. I went, "Wait a minute, I know that voice." And he turns his face into mine, looks me right in the eye, and says, "Don't do it unless you really have to. Be true to yourself." And then he walked away.

### If you weren't an actor, what would your dream job be?

I'd be an archaeologist. I had the opportunity to visit the Terracotta Warriors in China — those warriors guarded the tomb and represented the men who were buried. Oooh, creepy!

### How much is a pint of milk?

99 cents? I don't drink milk. I'm vegan, but even when I wasn't vegan, I stopped drinking milk years ago because the consistency of it just doesn't appeal to me. It's really weird!

### Do you have any scars?

I have many scars. I'm working on a scar right at this moment. I had a ski accident and I got two

plates and 23 screws put into my left ankle. I just had them all taken out after five years. So there's one — [holds his ankle up to the camera] — on that side. And there's another [he is now acrobatically turning his foot around] on that side. Pretty gnarly! Those are real freshies. There's another there [holds up his forearm] — that still has a plate and two screws in it. And there's another one there [he is out of his chair now, showing another scar on his shoulder]. Now you have my scar history. I'm all scarred up!

### What is the worst smell in the world?

Camel poop. I was in Saudi Arabia. It was my second camel ride ever. It was really scary because camels have that neck that is really mobile. He turned his head all the way around and was right in my face and hissed at me. I didn't know what to do, but my instinct clicked in because we are animals, so I hissed right back. It cooled him out. But then he pooped the worst smell I'd smelled ever.

### Do you have an irrational fear?

I remember reading a very scary book: *Jurassic Park*. The velociraptors scared the hell out of me. I went to bed and I didn't sleep all night and I had to shoot the next day. I kept thinking about velociraptors coming out from underneath the bed and eating me. It was a horrible night that I've never forgotten in all these years. I don't want to get eaten by animals with big, huge teeth the size of your finger.

### What film makes you cry?

*It's A Wonderful Life*. It's always the moment where [George Bailey] realises that the money's gone. It gets me in my heart. It hit me on a very personal note before I went bankrupt [in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis], and then it resounded more afterwards. I have a poster in my closet that my daughter made; the words of Gustavo Fring, to remind me: "You are a wealthy man now. And one must learn to be rich. To be poor, anyone can manage."

### What's your favourite sandwich?

Walter White's favourite sandwich, which is one that I can't eat right now because I've just done a 15-day cleanse: peanut butter and jelly!

### Schwarzenegger or Stallone?

Schwarzenegger! Without a doubt! I met him at the gym in Los Angeles. I was on the bicycle. I got off, I wiped the whole bike down. Arnold looks at me and he goes, "Oh wow, you remind me of someone I know." I said, "Who?" "Joe Morton. He's a good actor. But I tell you why I like you — I like you because you wipe every machine." I see him every few years in some awkward, weird situation and he always remembers me.

### When were you last naked outdoors?

In a forest in the Netherlands about five years ago. And I'm not going to tell you why.

THE GENTLEMEN IS ON NETFLIX IN MARCH





# reviews

FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

15 FEBRUARY-13 MARCH 2024

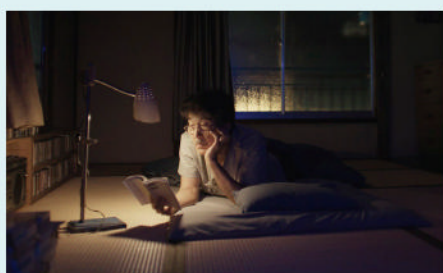
EDITED BY JOHN NUGENT

★★★★★  
EXCELLENT  
★★★★★  
STRONG  
★★★  
GOOD  
★★  
WEAK  
★  
YIKES



Cleansing the soul:  
Hirayama (Kōji Yakusho)  
enjoys the simple pleasure  
of his daily visit to the  
public baths.





**Top to bottom:**  
Hirayama  
polishes  
a porcelain  
palace; Cycling  
with his niece  
Niko (Arisa  
Nakano); Losing  
himself in a book.

## WATCH FIRST

The lead character, Hirayama, shares a name with the protagonist of Yasujiro Ozu's film, 1962's *An Autumn Afternoon*. Wenders — who made a documentary about Ozu, *Tokyo-Ga* — has said that it is “not a coincidence”.

FILM

# PERFECT DAYS

MEET THE MOST CHARMING  
CINEMATIC CLEANER SINCE WALL•E

★★★★

OUT 23 FEBRUARY / CERT PG / 123 MINS

**DIRECTOR** Wim Wenders

**CAST** Kōji Yakusho, Tokio Emoto, Arisa Nakano, Aoi Yamada

**PLOT** In Tokyo, toilet cleaner Hirayama (Yakusho) has a simple life, with everything just so... until an unexpected interruption brings change.

SOCIETY SNIFFS AT repetition, in its place prizing spontaneity and surprise. We are sold newness and adventure. How boring it is, we're told, to do the same old thing, day in, day out, forever. But what if routine makes us happy? What if it comforts us? What if we need it? In music and art, patterns are pleasing, recurring rhythms satisfying and, sometimes, as they can be in life, sublime. As Wim Wenders explores so tenderly in *Perfect Days*, there can be bliss in routine. It's nothing to be sniffed at.

Our guide is Kōji Yakusho's Hirayama, a gentle, solitary 60-something who lives in a modest but immaculate apartment in Tokyo's Oshiage neighbourhood. At dawn he wakes up, folds up his futon mat, trims his moustache and tends to his plants. Outside, a vending machine lights up the dark mornings as he grabs a coffee, hops into his little van and drives to work. And then out he gets, stepping onto the Shibuya streets in his jumpsuit and tooling up like a lavatorial Ghostbuster.

Hirayama cleans the facilities as if he's maintaining the Mona Lisa, with delicate care and attention, and he is all but invisible to the patrons who come and go. He smiles as they scuttle in; he waits patiently. It's a job of quiet virtue, not that Hirayama, who is entirely untroubled by ego, would see it like that. He takes pride in the process, then goes home, unfolds the futon mat, and the next day, happily, does it all again. Granted, these are lovely latrines — he is employed by the real-life Tokyo Toilet project, which boasts public commodes as contemporary works of art. *Trainspotting* this is not.

Is Hirayama content? Seemingly so. Speaking only when necessary, more likely to gesture than talk, he gives little away and wants for nothing. Or so it seems, until his life is unexpectedly interrupted, along with his

equilibrium, and the rhythm — of the man, and the film — wavers. Slightly.

There is little drama in *Perfect Days*, just morsels of movement, and an emotional evolution as we learn a smidge more about Hirayama. The 78-year-old Wenders, who co-wrote the film (with poet Takuma Takasaki), is now in his sixth decade as a filmmaker, and it's hard to imagine a young director having made this tribute to a man subtly sizing things up, and certainly not as compassionately as Wenders has. Meanwhile, life experience spills out of 68-year-old lead Kōji Yakusho, his performance a masterclass in nuance. When he does need to express himself more demonstrably, multiple emotions flicker all at once, and it's moving in a way that you can't entirely put your finger on. The whole film is like that: almost out of reach, with much to say while apparently doing so little. It sinks in stealthily.

It's all about those rhythms, and how we navigate them when they change. There's a Buddhist quality to the film, in which no sapling goes uncherished by Hirayama, who values trees at least as much as humans, stopping to admire the infiltrating sunlight, capturing it all with a film camera. Resolutely analogue, listening to music cassettes (Otis Redding, Lou Reed, Nina Simone) as he travels, he has rigidly remained in the early 1970s as the world has transformed around him. When he's not working, he is just as ritualistic: the same public baths, the same bar, the same bookshop. Living at his own pace, he is a man out of time but in the moment, however humble those moments may be. And he embraces work as something to get lost in. Or maybe retreat to.

The film embraces it too, and is as meditative as the man, with cinematographer Franz Lustig's camera watching him discreetly but affectionately. It's a loving portrait, profound in its serenity, but not without humour, Hirayama perpetually a little flustered by his unreliable, skittish young colleague Takashi (Tokio Emoto, a joyful puppy of a man). Yet it's the calmness that lingers, and it strikes you how rare that is in cinema these days. And in our lives. It's a slight film, happy to dither, to just be. It might not change your world, but it may well nourish you. Which is, of course, the point.

ALEX GODFREY

**VERDICT** Zen and the art of toilet cleaning? You'd better believe it. This is as gentle as it gets — a humble little film, maybe, but an enriching one. It's a soul-cleanse.





**Clockwise from left:** Neighbourhood watch: Edith (Olivia Colman) on the warpath; With rival Rose (Jessie Buckley); Edith's father Edward (Timothy Spall).



#### KILLER QUOTE

"Her Majesty Miss Swan takes it up the swanny and loves it more than Christmas Day."

AS READ BY  
EDWARD SWAN  
(TIMOTHY SPALL)

The film also has an ensemble of beloved British comedy actors playing assorted oddballs, such as Joanna Scanlan, Lolly Adefope and Hugh Skinner, but all are under-served by rather weak gags. Anjana Vasan, playing a policewoman who suspects that Rose has been framed, tries her best, but is mostly stuck rolling her eyes at her fellow police officers' stupidity.

It all actually fares better when it leans towards drama and social commentary over comedy. Timothy Spall is believably monstrous as Edith's overbearing father, a small-minded man furious with a changing world. Buckley has the less interesting lead role but is still compelling as a young woman with the audacity to be raucous, sexual and imperfect. "She's heinous," Edith sniffs, "and she's what we feared would come after the war." Unsurprisingly, Olivia Colman effortlessly elevates the weaker material, reminding us that her breakthrough was in comedies like *Peep Show* and *Green Wing*. She's a naturally funny presence, and in her hands Edith is vulnerable yet vindictive, shrinking yet snobbish, in love with her own martyrdom and new-found fame.

LAURA VENNING

**VERDICT** Repetitive insults do most of the heavy lifting for this comedy, but any time spent with actors as skilled as Colman and Buckley is time enjoyably spent.

#### FILM

## WICKED LITTLE LETTERS

THINK *CALL THE MIDWIFE* — IF IT HAD A POTTY MOUTH



OUT 23 FEBRUARY / CERT 15 / 100 MINS

**DIRECTOR** Thea Sharrock

**CAST** Olivia Colman, Jessie Buckley, Anjana Vasan, Joanna Scanlan, Malachi Kirby, Lolly Adefope, Timothy Spall

**PLOT** In 1920s England, Rose Gooding (Buckley) protests her innocence when Edith Swan (Colman) accuses her of sending insulting anonymous letters.

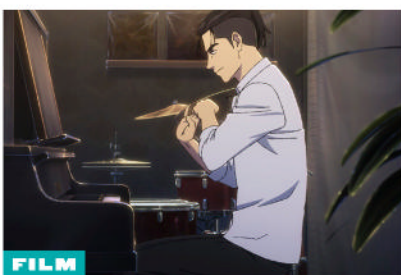
"THIS STORY IS more true than you'd think," a title card informs us with a wink at the beginning of *Wicked Little Letters*. Based on a real case of poison-pen missives shocking the Sussex seaside town of Littlehampton in

the 1920s, the film attempts to act as a kind of paean to British eccentricity, particularly a national propensity for swearing with gusto. It also portrays a nation on the brink of societal change, reeling from the horror of the First World War while the Suffragettes continued to fight for women's right to vote.

Edith Swan (Olivia Colman) is an upstanding member of her community: a godly woman who still lives with her elderly parents and whose idea of a wild evening is a stimulating game of whist. Meanwhile, her neighbour Rose Gooding (Jessie Buckley), recently arrived from Ireland, is fond of a drink, swears and sexually liberated, while also a loving mother. Curtain-twitching becomes all-out war, and even a national news story when Edith accuses Rose of sending her a series of creatively insulting anonymous letters, the latest of which calls Edith a "foxy-arsed old whore" and a "sad, stinky bitch".

Though the letters can be amusingly florid, almost poetic, screenwriter Jonny Sweet is overly reliant on them from the get-go, with most of them raising titters rather than laughs. At times it's all rather too quirky, like a swearer, less-funny *Paddington* film or Ealing Comedy.





FILM

## BLUE GIANT

★★★

OUT NOW / CERT 12A / 119 MINS

DIRECTOR Yuzuru Tachikawa

CAST Shōtarō Mamiya, Amane Okayama, Yuki Yamada

For almost every transcendently beautiful moment in *Blue Giant*, where music and animation work in breathtaking concert with each other, there's one that feels out of tune. As the film follows a trio of jazz musicians looking to hit the big time, its big musical sequences are spectacularly imagined; you can see the great ideas housed within each scene even at their most awkward-looking. But there are glaring imperfections in its sporadic use of 3D animation — a distracting bum note in otherwise thrilling performances. When it all comes together — abstract musical imagery warping and stretching with flashes of colour, as the realistic detail of the imagery melts away — the euphoria is hard to resist. **KC**



FILM

## FIGHTER

★★★

OUT NOW / CERT 15 / 164 MINS

DIRECTOR Siddharth Anand

CAST Hrithik Roshan, Deepika Padukone, Anil Kapoor

For the past few years, director Siddharth Anand has delivered some of the biggest blockbusters in Indian cinema, including last year's record-breaker *Pathaan*. His latest, *Fighter* — an attempt to capitalise on the success of *Top Gun: Maverick* — wears its jingoistic patches proudly on its jumpsuit. The plot is simple: an evil terrorist group is attempting to cause trouble in Kashmir. Only our brave pilots stand in their way. Will their love of country and dedication to each other save the day? You already know the answer. Subtle this is not, but it delivers what you'd expect from an Indian military blockbuster: excitement, passion and a level of patriotism that's equivalent to being repeatedly punched in the face with the Indian tricolour. **TS**



Bob Marley (Kingsley Ben-Adir) sings his heart out. **Below:** Marley and his wife Rita (Lashana Lynch) in happier times.

FILM

BOB MARLEY:  
ONE LOVEGET UP, STAND UP FOR THE FIRST  
MAJOR BIOPIC OF A LEGEND

★★★

OUT NOW / CERT 12A / 104 MINS

DIRECTOR Reinaldo Marcus Green

CAST Kingsley Ben-Adir, Lashana Lynch, James Norton, Tosin Cole, Umi Myers, Anthony Welsh, Nia Ashi, Aston Barrett Jr., Anna-Sharé Blake, Michael Gandolfini

**PLOT** In 1976, Bob Marley (Ben-Adir) is a global reggae star. As he starts work on his next album, he embraces a level of fame that is bigger than him.

IN HIS SHORT life, Bob Marley undeniably achieved a huge amount. He ushered reggae music into the mainstream, recorded albums that have sold over 75 million copies, became an iconic, globally recognised megastar, and spread a message of peace and unity. He died at just 36, at the peak of his fame. He's ripe for a biopic, and in *King Richard* director Reinaldo Marcus Green's hands he gets a very respectful one. As a telling of the events of Marley's adult life, this is solid and sincere, but also seemingly cautious not to dig too deep.

It begins in 1976, when Marley (Kingsley Ben-Adir) is already very famous. He's cracked America and is an icon in his home country of Jamaica, a place deeply politically divided and plagued with violence. In a bid to apolitically unite people, Marley is to play a 'Smile Jamaica' concert. Two days before, an attempted assassination leaves Marley injured and his wife, Rita (Lashana Lynch), in hospital. Marley goes ahead with the gig anyway. *One Love* is a portrait of Marley finding his place not just as a singer but as a man who can bring people



together; whose own life exists to enrich the lives of others.

Green takes us through the big notes of the period: some very entertaining scenes as Marley and his Wailers find the sound for their next album, *Exodus*; strain on his marriage as fame takes its toll; culture clash in punky '70s London; a hero's welcome in Jamaica. But it's much more a timeline of events than an exploration of a man. There are four writers credited on the film, including Green and *Wolf Of Wall Street* writer Terence Winter, but the script is underdeveloped. It only grazes the more complicated parts of Marley's life. His fathering many children outside his marriage is raised in a street row with his wife, but otherwise ignored. His childhood — most of his life pre-1976 — is touched on in hazy but fleeting and unrevealing flashbacks. It seems nervous about adding nuance or shadows to its glowing depiction of Marley, but the result is that it keeps its own subject at a distance.

Crucially, however, Ben-Adir is excellent as Marley. He bears little physical resemblance to the real man, but he gets the easy, languid presence and the electric, energetic on-stage persona. He's believable as a man who simultaneously craves and rejects fame, knowing the good it can do others and bad it can do him. And he keeps the accent steady when many around him are losing theirs. In a film that mostly sticks to reliable formula, he is one thing to love. **OLLY RICHARDS**

**VERDICT** A by-the-numbers biography, this sheds little new light on an icon but features a soaring performance from Kingsley Ben-Adir.



Band of brothers: the  
heroes of the 100th  
Bomb Group assemble.



WATCH  
FIRST

The 2010  
documentary *WW II  
In HD: The Air War*  
covers many of the  
events featured in  
*Masters Of The Air*,  
with contributions  
from Casey Affleck,  
Elijah Wood and  
Sean Astin,  
and narration from  
Rob Lowe.

TV

# MASTERS OF THE AIR

THE TEAM BEHIND *BAND OF  
BROTHERS* BAND TOGETHER AGAIN



OUT NOW (APPLE TV+) / EPISODES VIEWED 9 OF 9

**SHOWRUNNER** John Orloff

**CAST** Austin Butler, Callum Turner, Barry Keoghan,  
Nate Mann, Anthony Boyle, Raff Law, Ncuti Gatwa

**PLOT** In World War II, the 100th Bomb Group of  
the USAAF must fly into occupied Europe on  
strategic missions. Not everyone makes it home.

WE ARE SPOILED with blockbuster telly in the streaming era — but back in 2001, there was *nothing* quite like *Band Of Brothers*. HBO's grand adaptation of Stephen Ambrose's non-fiction World War II tome was, at the time, the most expensive television series ever mounted. Epic in budget, in scale, in scope and in stars, it boasted

ten stunning episodes on a breadth rarely seen on TV. Bolstered by Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks — fresh off of *Saving Private Ryan* — as executive producers, it was in every sense a landmark.

A sibling, *The Pacific*, arrived in 2010, and now, roughly another decade or so later, the same creative team — jumping ship to HBO rival Apple — revisit World War II from another perspective: the sky. It follows a similar arc and quality to the two earlier shows: a gentle voiceover (Anthony Boyle, as likeable navigator Major Harry Crosby) guiding us through the familiar soldier's journey of excitement, losses, replacements, burnout, and salutary reminders of why we fight. The real-life 100th Bomb Group featured here were, like the Easy Company of *Band Of Brothers*, famous for taking unusually heavy losses, earning the nickname of the 'Bloody Hundredth'.

Series writer John Orloff, adapting the book of the same name by Donald L. Miller, recognises that the strength of these shows rests on characters and actors for us to cling onto in the mêlée. Just as the heart of *Band Of Brothers* was the friendship between officers Richard Winters (Damian Lewis) and Lewis Nixon (Ron Livingston), the chemistry between Austin Butler's Gale 'Buck' Cleven and Callum Turner's John 'Bucky' Egan is central to *Masters*. Butler brings a kind of *Top Gun* cool

to Buck: with his *matinée* looks, bassy voice and ever-present toothpick, he is an old-fashioned kind of leader. Bucky is the more impulsive, harder-drinking id of the pair, the British actor lending some astute human touches (mispronouncing 'Norfolk', as an American would, is a lovely choice).

As the series progresses, the focus shifts around the ensemble: tough-talking Curtis Biddick (an unusually straight-laced Barry Keoghan), heroic Robert 'Rosie' Rosenthal (Nate Mann, excellent) and boundary-breaking Robert Daniels (Ncuti Gatwa, underused). The series allows you to get just attached enough to these characters before they begin taking casualties in shocking numbers.

Every episode makes for heart-stopping viewing. Under the steady watch of directors like Cary Joji Fukunaga and *Band Of Brothers* veteran Tim Van Patten, the flying sequences, and the ridiculous risks undertaken, are staged with a superbly confident hand. An epic bombing run in Episode 3, the largest air armada in human history at the time, is unbearably gripping; bailing out of a burning plane to parachute into Nazi-occupied Europe, it's clear, requires a mind-boggling level of courage. It's not always





**Top to bottom:** A lighter moment for the USAAF recruits; Pilots Buck (Austin Butler) and Bucky (Callum Turner); Who? Ncuti Gatwa as 2nd Lt. Robert H. Daniels.

clear what's happening, especially with opaque air-force jargon flying around and the whole cast acting from under masks, but that confusion only adds to the experience. It's unfortunate that you sometimes feel the excessive use of CGI (by necessity — none of the B-17 planes flown by the 100th are in operation any longer), but the drama and intensity is always kept at maximum altitude.

Inevitably, this all comes with a certain strain of American exceptionalism. *Masters Of The Air* does occasionally remember that there were other countries fighting with the Allies in World War II, but the RAF enjoy only a passing mention, and non-Americans are largely depicted through stereotypes or clichés (Brits are invariably stiff-upper-lipped; one German gets the unironic line, “For you, ze war is over”). This is a view of the war from a triumphalist American lens; the final episode even offers a moment of literal flag-fluttering Stars-and-Stripes patriotism.

Yet it's hard not to be stirred. There is something moving about the moral simplicity of it all, a straightforward fight against fascism and the astonishing response from ordinary men using unbelievably precarious (and at the time, brand-new) technology. At its best, *Masters Of The Air* functions like the epic war movies Hollywood used to produce: a vast canvas, a sweeping starry ensemble, a sobering, involving reminder of history's bloodiest conflict. Let's hope Spielberg, Hanks et al do it again in another ten years. **JOHN NUGENT**

**VERDICT** Some minor quibbles aside, this is another blockbuster TV smash: a dazzlingly vital history lesson that summons the best tension, drama and emotion of *Band Of Brothers*.



**Here:** Jessica Chastain as former addict Sylvia.

**Below:** A bond forms between Saul (Peter Sarsgaard) and Sylvia.

FILM

## MEMORY

CHASTAIN AND SARSGAARD TEAM UP FOR A REDEPTIVE DRAMA

★★★★

OUT 23 FEBRUARY / CERT TBC / 100 MINS

**DIRECTOR** Michel Franco

**CAST** Jessica Chastain, Peter Sarsgaard, Merritt Wever, Brooke Timber, Elsie Fisher, Josh Charles, Jessica Harper

**PLOT** A recovering addict (Chastain) with a traumatic past lets her walls down for a sweet, handsome man (Sarsgaard) with early-onset dementia.

DESPITE THE FACT that Michel Franco's new film focuses on an alcoholic grappling with the lingering effects of child abuse, *Memory* may well be his most buoyant work yet. The Mexican director, known for his violent and unforgiving plots (*After Lucia*, *Chronic*), is often considered something of a cinematic sadist who enjoys inflicting as much pain as possible onto his characters. This time, however, his trademark brand of screen cruelty finds a more optimistic narrative — almost feel-good in its theme of redemption.

That isn't initially clear when we're first introduced to Sylvia (Jessica Chastain), a recovering addict who works with adults living with learning disabilities. With a grim-set expression, her life is elaborately planned: AA meetings, a stern approach to childcare duties, a Fort Knox-like alarm system to protect her house. After meeting a kind but disoriented ex-schoolmate named Saul (Peter Sarsgaard), Sylvia's walls slowly come down... only to show us just how deep the roots of abuse can grow, tangling and tugging below the surface.

Franco has, rather unexpectedly, made a shrewd movie about the precarity of healing from trauma. Sylvia's frequently cruel



demeanour — “You deserve to be the way you are,” she says to Saul, abandoning him in the woods without his Emergency Contact lanyard — proves how the path of recovery can morph into quicksand at the slightest perceived threat or trigger. Sylvia isn't a perfect victim, but someone whose past has hardened her into a contradictory figure that often goes against the grain.

Opposite Chastain, Sarsgaard is equally worthy. Saul's dementia is not presented purely as a form of suffering, but is instead something that can enhance his capability for empathy; when Sylvia discloses a painful memory to him, he asks her permission to write it down so that he doesn't forget — just one of many moments that twangs at the heartstrings. Instead of having him monologue about his condition, we get astute directorial touches instead: Saul first enters the frame out of focus, and later is speaking but framed from the neck-down — canny choices to highlight his cognitive blur, the separation between mind and body. Is he lovesick? Is he trapped in a hazy brain-prison of looped thoughts? Or is that sort of the same thing, sometimes?

Many films that deal with similar themes to this can come across as cheap in the way they reach for tear-jerking moments. But save for some moments of unnecessary exposition, *Memory* feels so compelling precisely because it keeps its cards close to its chest. **STEPH GREEN**

**VERDICT** In a film that could have bowed to easy clichés, Chastain and Sarsgaard are a class act — their touching, tactile chemistry is the film's triumph.





Agent Aidan (Sam Rockwell) and author Elly (Bryce Dallas Howard). **Below** Agent Argyle (Henry Cavill) and Wyatt (John Cena) are the bomb.

## FILM

# ARGYLLE

IT'S LIKE JAMES BOND — ONLY MORE META (AND THERE'S A CAT)

★★★★

OUT NOW / CERT 12A / 139 MINS

**DIRECTOR** Matthew Vaughn

**CAST** Bryce Dallas Howard, Sam Rockwell, Henry Cavill, John Cena, Dua Lipa, Bryan Cranston

**PLOT** Author Elly Conway (Howard) writes spy books about Agent Argyle (Cavill). When it emerges there's truth to her fiction, real-life agent Aidan (Rockwell) steps in.

MATTHEW VAUGHN HAS never played by the rules. Whether it's his penchant for independence, eschewing the traditional studio system, or his gleeful genre subversions (superhero tales in *Kick-Ass*, fantasy adventures in *Stardust*, spy movies in *Kingsman*), he prefers doing things his own way. With *Argylle*, he basically subverts himself — it might be another film in the espionage arena, but here he tempers his tendency for ultra-violence and gross-out gags for a rug-pull-heavy romp boasting surprising sweetness; a Vaughn movie without the bits that make your mum wince.

While the director's signature excesses are out, his playfulness remains. As telegraphed by *Argylle*'s unnecessarily convoluted origins (the film is seemingly based on a real novel by author 'Elly Conway', who is actually the film's lead character, played by Bryce Dallas Howard), this is a film that wilfully freefalls down its own narrative rabbit hole, unspooling an array of twists across its runtime while paying homage to the fun, frivolity and fashion of '60s spy flicks. That's the general milieu of Conway's (Howard) acclaimed 'Argylle' novel series, here visualised with Henry Cavill as the smooth-talking (and smooth-haired) Agent Argyle, uncovering a global conspiracy via classy cocktails and femme fatales and chaotic car chases.



But Elly's conception of spies rubs up against the reality when she crosses paths with Sam Rockwell's Aidan — a distinctly un-Argylle-esque agent who swoops in when the author finds herself under fire, her espionage plots unwittingly holding real-world truths. It's here that *Argylle*'s true magic unfolds — Howard and Rockwell make a wonderful pair with genuine chemistry and great comic timing; the changing nature of their relationship as the plot careens through multiple meta layers becomes truly touching.

It's that emotional throughline — and the giddiness of its ongoing reveals — that carry *Argylle*'s weaker moments. It moves so swiftly through its revelations that you barely have time to consider if it actually all adds up, while Vaughn's ever-stylish filmmaking does sometimes give way to slightly airless CG compositions. When the film is intent on exploring a reality beyond spy fiction, you want that reality to feel more... well, real. One last mid-credits twist is a brain-breaker too far, while the overstuffed cast leaves legends like Samuel L. Jackson and Bryan Cranston mostly yelling in empty rooms.

But where it counts, *Argylle* has the goods. The action — the final work from the late, great fight co-ordinator Brad Allan — is inventive, boasting the sweetest shootout ever; Howard and Rockwell are dynamite together, both given oodles to do; Claudia Schiffer's cat Chip hits his every mark. And no iffy gags to boot. Enough, then, to have you awaiting Conway's next chapter.

**BEN TRAVIS**

**VERDICT** Flashy, fun and light on its feet, *Argylle* papers over its cracks with twist upon twist — and charming performances from its central duo.



## EXPATS

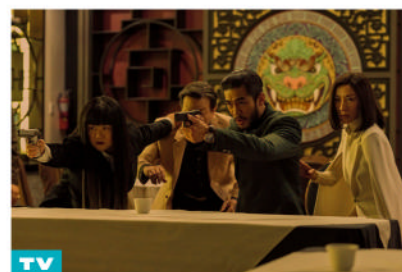
★★★★

OUT NOW (PRIME VIDEO) / EPISODES VIEWED 5 OF 6

**SHOWRUNNER** Lulu Wang

**CAST** Nicole Kidman, Ji-young Yoo, Sarayu Blue, Jack Huston

In her first major outing since *The Farewell*, Lulu Wang brings her astute eye to this broader, starker venture. Based on Janice Y.K. Lee's novel *The Expatriates*, this follows three women: Mercy (Ji-young Yoo), a young Korean-American wrestling with guilt; Hilary (Saray Blue), a wealthy housewife struggling with fertility complications; and Margaret (Nicole Kidman), whose life was shattered by the disappearance of her youngest child. Through interweaving stories, the series interrogates the dynamics of the über-wealthy community and the largely female domestic workforce hired to clean their homes, cater their parties and care for their families. It all makes for a vivid study that lays bare the power of motherhood, grief and guilt. **BW**



## THE BROTHERS SUN

★★★★

OUT NOW (NETFLIX) / EPISODES VIEWED 8 OF 8

**SHOWRUNNER** Brad Falchuk

**CAST** Michelle Yeoh, Sam Song Li, Justin Chien, Joon Lee

An assassination attempt leaves Triad gang leader Big Sun (Johnny Kou) in a coma; his eldest offspring, deadly enforcer Charles Sun (Justin Chien) is forced to protect his oblivious mother Eileen (Michelle Yeoh) and younger brother Bruce (Sam Song Li). With a decapitated head floating in a fish tank adorning the show's poster, it's obvious from the get-go that the Suns have more skeletons in the closet than most. Yeoh revels in her role, but it's in the warmth of the bond between the brothers that the heart of the series lies. The action, meanwhile, is hugely inventive: elaborate (and extremely violent) set-pieces to rival *Warrior* or *Gangs Of London*. It all makes for one of 2024's first binge-worthy shows. **NA**



A grave romance: Lisa (Kathryn Newton) gets close to The Creature (Cole Sprouse).



## FILM

# LISA FRANKENSTEIN

WELL, ACTUALLY, LISA FRANKENSTEIN IS THE NAME OF THE DOCTOR

★★★

OUT 1 MARCH / CERT TBC / 101 MINS

**DIRECTOR** Zelda Williams

**CAST** Kathryn Newton, Cole Sprouse, Liza Soberano, Henry Eikenberry, Joe Chrest, Carla Gugino

**PLOT** Lisa (Newton) is a lonely teenager looking for love and purpose. She finds it — and more — in the resurrected corpse of a young man (Sprouse).

IT IS AMUSING to imagine how Mary Shelley's scientist character Victor Frankenstein, with his dogged scientific pursuits and intellectual achievements, might react to giving life to

something as haywire and horny as *Lisa Frankenstein*. Director Zelda Williams and writer Diablo Cody make it feel like a bit of a no-brainer: surely the only reason for reanimating a rotting corpse (a handsome one, mind you) is to give purpose to your lonely little life?

*Lisa Frankenstein* is dubbed a "coming of rage", a neat riff on both the seminal horror text about a misshapen man back from the dead and the teen rite-of-passage blueprint in which a young girl desperately tries to fit in. Lisa Swallows (Kathryn Newton, spiky and with great comedic timing) doesn't necessarily need everyone to like her — but just a little more attention would be nice.

She makes up for her lacklustre home life (uninvolved dad after a freak tragedy killed her mum, overbearing stepmother, kind-hearted but over-achieving stepsister) by seeking refuge in the nearby cemetery. She has a favourite grave — it's his. The Creature is never named, but during one fatal storm his body rises from the ground and, well, Cole Sprouse (*Riverdale*'s Jughead!) ends up in Lisa's room.

And so begins a story of young love, extreme makeover, gentle murder and self-discovery along the way. The film refuses to settle on just one thing, having fun with the body-horror

elements of the Creature's slow return to life (it's a perfect role for Sprouse, who is virtually wordless but brings humour and care to the smallest gestures) and Lisa's sudden lust for murder — as well as high-school politics, issues of consent, impossible beauty standards and more. Williams mixes it all together and turns up the volume on the excess and ambition of the '80s with a poppy jukebox soundtrack and countless high-octane outfits which owe much to *Grease*.

There's fun to be had in the genre exercise and through the sheer charisma of the young stars, but Cody — undoubtedly a strong writer — gives Lisa and her lover so much to do that it can sometimes feel a bit jumbled. The result is entertaining, albeit somewhat anticlimactic. Will this unusual couple even stay together? Did anybody actually deserve to die? Lisa Frankenstein shrugs off the answers, reassuring us that to enjoy the ride should be enough.

ELLA KEMP

**VERDICT** These teens and their world may be a bit chaotic and unfocused, but it's good to have Diablo Cody back to telegraph messy adolescent horror, with a smile full of teeth.



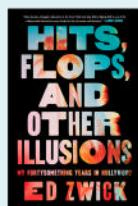
## BOOKS

# HITS, FLOPS, AND OTHER ILLUSIONS

ANOTHER PAGE-TURNER OF A MOVIE MEMOIR TO ADD TO YOUR BOOKSHELF

★★★★★

AUTHOR EDWARD ZWICK



AS ANYONE WHO follows his riveting X threads will know, Edward Zwick is a born raconteur. With that same twinkly seen-it-all insight and self-deprecating sense of humour, the prolific filmmaker behind *Glory*, *The Last Samurai*,

*Love & Other Drugs* and many more has finally turned those stories into memoir form. Zwick may not be quite a household name, but he has had a lengthy and expansive career, and *Hits, Flops, And Other Illusions: My Fortysomething Years In Hollywood* is not short of A-list anecdotes.

He casually drops names as if they would otherwise weigh him down, spilling that Shia LaBeouf sent him a poem “about truth” two weeks before quitting *Trial By Fire*; that Anthony Hopkins would scribble “NAR” (No Acting Required) next to parts of his *Legends Of The Fall* script; that Meg Ryan — who played a helicopter pilot in *Courage Under Fire* — has a fear of helicopters.

But this isn’t a salacious tell-all tome. Far from it: Zwick is more dedicated to unravelling the mystery of his craft, each chapter bracingly honest in unfurling the thrills and fiascos of each of his projects, the reader gradually getting a sense of the mad mess that is movie-making. A common theme throughout is Zwick’s sense of



Legend of the pen: writer, director, producer, and now author Edward Zwick.

humility: on 1989’s *Glory*, which saw Denzel Washington win his first Oscar, he learns that good directing can simply mean getting out of the actor’s way. “Sometimes shutting up is the best direction of all,” he writes.

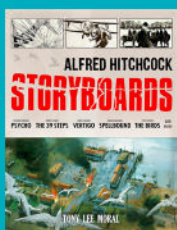
*Glory* was Zwick’s big breakthrough — but the following chapter details the now-forgotten *Leaving Normal*, an abject critical and commercial flop. Some of the book’s strongest moments are in his vivid, forthright accounts of personal failure, a staple of any film career. “Everyone tells stories,” he says. “I happen to collect the indignities.”

There is no shortage, in fact, of pearls of wisdom like this. From the astute (“Movies aren’t born — they fight their way to life”) to the witty (“Another important part of directing is

nodding”) to the vulnerable (“Nobody can write worse reviews than a movie’s director”), there is a treasure trove of aphorisms for the budding filmmaker and curious film-fan alike.

It can sometimes, admittedly, feel a bit too inside-baseball. And even in his frankness, Zwick can be overly gushy about his collaborators. Yet by the end, he retains that sense of humility, echoing William Goldman’s famous declaration, from another gloriously plain-spoken movie memoir: nobody knows anything. **JOHN NUGENT**

**VERDICT** Written with clarity and candour, this is an entertaining chronicle of a storied career. Zwick’s frank accounts of failure are just as compelling as his triumphs.

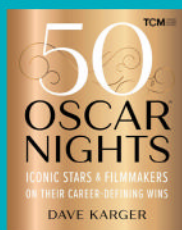


## ALFRED HITCHCOCK: STORYBOARDS

★★★★★

AUTHOR TONY LEE MORAL

Despite the authoritative title, this coffee-table volume only covers 11 of Hitchcock’s vast filmography — no *Rear Window*, no *Rope*, no *Notorious*. Even so, it’s a total treat: the filmmaker relied heavily on storyboards, and the original cards reprinted here are surprisingly detailed and beautiful, author Tony Lee Moral offering insightful context. A must for Hitch-heads. **JN**

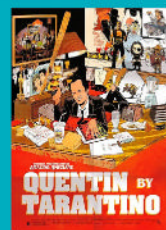


## 50 OSCAR NIGHTS

★★★★

AUTHOR DAVE KARGER

The big selling-point of this book is the stars: interviews with 50 Oscar-winners on their “career-defining wins”. Participating A-listers include Meryl Streep, Michael Douglas, Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese. Impressive, but the focus on the awards ceremony over the actual work leaves it feeling superficial, while the interviews — presented as first-person accounts — don’t allow room for editorial point-of-view. **JN**



## QUENTIN BY TARANTINO

★★★★★

AUTHOR AMAZING AMÉZIANE

Through the bleeding ink of Amazing Améziene’s bold illustrations, an imagined conversation with Quentin Tarantino transports us through every corner of his filmmaking journey, from childhood cinema trips to failed projects to films that shaped his beloved characters. It may not offer anything new narratively for die-hard fans, but this vibrant deep-dive into the cult filmmaker’s brain is endearing nonetheless. **BW**





Funny guy: Leon Black (J.B. Smoove) witnesses Larry David causing more hilarious shenanigans.

#### KILLER QUOTE

"Balls are disgusting. They're hideous. It's like having the Elephant Man under your penis."  
LARRY  
(LARRY DAVID)

TV

## CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM: SEASON 12

THE SITCOM'S FINAL SEASON IS PRETTY, PRETTY, PRETTY GOOD



OUT NOW (SKY COMEDY) / EPISODES VIEWED 9 OF 10

**SHOWRUNNERS** Larry David, Jeff Schaffer  
**CAST** Larry David, Jeff Garlin, Susie Essman, JB Smoove, Richard Lewis, Tracey Ullman, Vince Vaughn, Cheryl Hines, Sienna Miller, Sean Hayes

**PLOT** Larry (David) becomes a national liberal hero after breaking an arcane voting law in Georgia, but he faces a trial as a result.

LARRY DAVID WILL do pretty much anything to get a laugh. In the opening episode of this 12th and final season of *Curb*, he spends most of the

time wearing a pair of incongruous horn-rimmed ladies' glasses after his old friend Auntie Rae (Ellia English) tries his specs on and bends them out of shape due to her "freakish" big head. With echoes of the ridiculous wig disguise he wore in Season 9 when he faced a fatwa, every single shot of Larry in these "lady glasses" is stupidly funny.

Throughout the storied history of what must be the most consistently hilarious TV comedy of the last few decades, David has deployed all manner of weapons in his considerable comedic arsenal, from wigs and glasses, beautifully timed slapstick and ingenious plays on words to extreme profanity, unlikely sex scenes, catchphrases and running jokes. He also delves fearlessly into every hot-button subject of our time, but does so with such charm that his puncturing of taboos ends up disarmingly funny rather than cheaply offensive. And he loves to get famous people yelling at him, and he's outdone himself in this final run, with appearances from Tracey Ullman (returning as Larry's nightmare girlfriend from the previous season), Sean Hayes, Dan Levy, Conan O'Brien, Troy Kotsur, and, best of all, Sienna Miller, playing a version of herself absurdly obsessed with Judaism.

As ever, there's a pleasing overall arc to the series, this time involving some unexpected legal proceedings hanging over Larry's head, in a possible nod to the ending of *Seinfeld* when the core gang went on trial, and, as is tradition, every episode ends with seemingly disparate story strands drawn together in deeply satisfying style. But it's a measure of just how willing David is to mine anything and everything for comic effect that some of the funniest scenes this season occur when David is simply a vessel of impotent rage, at inanimate objects or unwitting service-industry workers. Those particular scenes don't really go anywhere, and don't need to. The show still makes time for some purely preposterous comedy shtick, and thank heavens for that.

Quite how David has decided to sign off from *Curb* remains to be seen, with the finale being kept under wraps, but however it ends, it's pretty clear this has earned its place as an all-timer in the TV comedy hall of fame.

BOYD HILTON

**VERDICT** With an array of great guest stars and triumphantly surprising storylines, the final season of *Curb* is as brilliantly funny and beautifully outrageous as ever.



## GAMES

# PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

THE CLASSIC SIDE-SCROLLER RETURNS AFTER A LENGTHY HIATUS

★★★★★

PC, PS4, PS5, SWITCH, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES X|S

THE *PRINCE OF Persia* franchise was last seen with 2010's *The Forgotten Sands*, a return to the well-loved *Sands Of Time* continuity, but one that mainly served to complement that year's cinematic outing. Neither movie nor game set the world alight, though, and the series went dormant.

A lot rides on *The Lost Crown*, then. But rather than play it safe and serve up something familiar, developer Ubisoft Montpellier has gambled on a revamp that returns to the series' earliest 2D roots, taps narrative elements from later 3D adventures, and wraps everything in a striking new visual style. It's a risk that, overall, pays off.

Tapping into Persian mythology, players control Sargon, a young warrior in the elite Immortals cadre. When young Prince Ghassan is kidnapped, Sargon and his allies are drawn to Mount Qaf, a strange complex where time is fractured and reality folds in on itself. Players explore this sprawling, maddening labyrinth in a similar fashion to *Metroid*, using Sargon's athletic skills and a growing number of special abilities gifted by the mythical Simurgh bird to reach new areas.

While this necessitates a lot of backtracking, it's supremely satisfying to finally be able to



A 'solid hit' for the returning Sargon and his allies.

reach previously inaccessible parts of the map. It also allows for some spectacular platforming challenges — think chaining air dashes, double-jumps and wall-hops to navigate hazardous mazes where even one misstep will cast you back to the start. These ingeniously designed sections are always a trial but never unfair, a tricky balance that ultimately rewards players who have mastered the controls.

Combat is equally precise, blending twin-sword mêlée combos and ranged arrow attacks with Simurgh powers such as teleportation to dominate enemies. Timing is everything — mis-time a parry, and Sargon will take massive damage, but perfect counters allow for splashy fatalities against foes. This is further boosted by ability-tweaking amulets and charged 'Athra surges' that can turn the tables on opponents. Fearsome

boss fights warrant experimenting with loadouts and tactics, each battle serving as a true set-piece.

Unfortunately, a lack of polish holds *The Lost Crown* back. English voice-acting sounds flat and rigid (although an option for more authentic Farsi is welcome), and character portraits during conversations are inconsistent — one character has a half-face mask that keeps switching sides. Disappointing, but *The Lost Crown* is at its best when focused on its sharp navigation and battle mechanics. Sargon may be trying to escape the temporal paradox that is Mount Qaf, but you may be reluctant to leave its winding halls. **MATT KAMEN**

**VERDICT** Less a return to form for *Prince Of Persia* than a bold new beginning, *The Lost Crown* hones in on its excellent platforming and combat to deliver a solid hit.

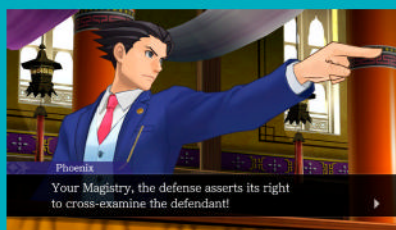


## THE LAST OF US PART II REMASTERED

★★★★★

PS5 / OUT NOW

*The Last Of Us Part II* looked great on PS4 — is a 'remaster' less than four years later necessary? Probably not, but developer Naughty Dog takes a Criterion Collection approach for this PS5 release, pairing 'making of' material and director's commentaries with technical overhauls and a new combat-heavy mode. The definitive way to play one of the best games of the decade. **MK**



## APOLLO JUSTICE: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY

★★★★★

PC, PS4, SWITCH, XBOX ONE / OUT NOW

Remastering the second *Ace Attorney*, this collection of visual-novel-meets-deductive-puzzle-games remains as compelling as ever. Characters evolve over the three titles, and while piecing together clues and evidence to protect clients makes for slow gameplay, tearing apart a shifty witness' testimony with a perfectly timed, "Objection!" is a thrill worthy of any courtroom drama. **MK**



## TEKKEN 8

★★★★★

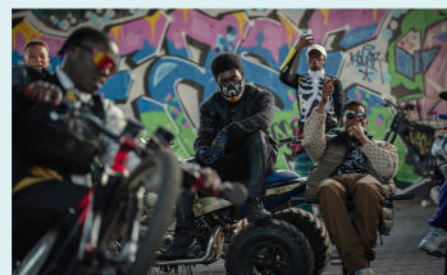
PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S, PC / OUT NOW

*Tekken 8* is a very angry game. With a new focus on aggressive play and a 'Heat' gauge for powerful strikes, it's a ferocious new entry for the venerable fighting series. Yet with its trademark bonkers story mode, a meta 'Arcade Quest' guiding a Mii-style avatar to in-game *Tekken* glory, and the return of violent volleyball mini-game Tekken Ball, it's as gloriously daft as ever. **MK**





Can't stand the heat? Izi (Kane Robinson) and Benji (Jedaiah Bannerman) get out of The Kitchen. **Below, top to bottom:** Gang leader Staples (Hope Ikpoku Jr, centre); Benji with pal Ruby (Teija Kabs).



## FILM

# THE KITCHEN

TWO MANY COOKS DON'T SPOIL THIS SOCIAL-REALIST SCI-FI BROTH

★★★★

OUT NOW (NETFLIX) / CERT 15 / 107 MINS

**DIRECTORS** Kibwe Tavares, Daniel Kaluuya

**CAST** Kane Robinson, Jedaiah Bannerman, Hope Ikpoku Jr, Teija Kabs, Demmy Ladipo, Cristale, BackRoad Gee

**PLOT** In near-future London, Izi (Robinson) and Benji (Bannerman) look to leave their dilapidated London housing estate, known as 'the Kitchen'.

THE KITCHEN — NAMED for the rebellious, run-down fictional housing estate it is set in — is the latest entry in a relatively small sub-genre: British social-realist sci-fi. Set in a London in which the government have all but given up looking after tenants of the aforementioned vast Brutalist edifice, except to deploy violent police raids, the film sees debut directors Daniel Kaluuya and Kibwe Tavares offer a credible near-future for

the capital, while examining present-day issues. The lure of gangs to disaffected youth, the struggles of single parenting and the inadequacy of social housing aren't new problems, but they are adeptly woven together here.

When we meet protagonist Izi (Kane Robinson, aka grime stalwart Kano), he's in the shower using up the block's water to the chagrin of irate neighbours, as befits his self-centred attitude. He's on the cusp of moving off the estate to a fancy new yuppie flat and knows his days in The Kitchen are numbered. But while working a shift at ecological funeral home Life After Life, he encounters teen Benji (promising newcomer Jedaiah Bannerman) mourning the loss of his mother, Izi's ex-girlfriend. The pair tentatively strike up a relationship, with Izi taking Benji under his wing and rescuing him during one of the police raids. Izi wants to keep Benji away from the gangs trying to enlist the youngster; in the ostensible absence of a father, he offers the paternal guidance a good one may have yielded.

Though the film is set in a dystopian 2044 — with blaring neon and futurist funeral homes — sci-fi plays second fiddle to social-realism in Kaluuya and co-writer Joe Murtagh's script. The thrilling truck-heist opening sequence sees a motorbike gang steal food supplies to distribute back at The Kitchen. Optimists may baulk, but

in an age of ever-increasing food-bank use, such scenes don't seem that unbelievable. Likewise, the regular police raids don't seem that far-fetched.

Although *The Kitchen* doesn't offer quite enough originality or excitement to be truly great, several elements do compel. Tavares' architectural background has evidently influenced the film's strong visual identity, leaving us feeling just as trapped as the Kitchen residents. Robinson (in his best screen performance to date) and Bannerman are a highly watchable man-and-boy-thrown-together-by-circumstance. Most surprisingly, former footballer Ian Wright excels as estate DJ Lord Kitchener (a nod to the Trinidadian calypso star of the same name who came over to the UK on the *Empire Windrush*). If Kaluuya and Tavares continue their directorial careers making choices as inspired as Wright's casting, great things lie ahead. **LOU THOMAS**

**VERDICT** Not as revolutionary as *Children Of Men*, nor as wild as *Attack The Block*, *The Kitchen* is still solid British sci-fi with a social-realist flavour. An auspicious directorial debut from Tavares and Kaluuya.



Orion is lured to the Dark side.



## FILM

# ORION AND THE DARK

A DARK KNIGHT RISES FOR KIDS' MOVIES: CHARLIE KAUFMAN

★★★★★

OUT NOW (NETFLIX) / CERT TBC / 92 MINS

**DIRECTOR** Sean Charmatz

**CAST** Jacob Tremblay, Colin Hanks, Paul Walter Hauser, Angela Bassett, Ike Barinholtz, Natasia Demetriou, Carla Gugino

**PLOT** Young boy Orion (Tremblay) is terrified of the dark. One day, Dark (Hauser) comes to life — and shows him that there's more to life than his fears.

CHARLIE KAUFMAN'S LAST film, *I'm Thinking Of Ending Things*, ended with a naked elderly janitor stalking the corridors of a school while a maggot-infested pig waffled on about physics. It's safe to say his latest, a family-friendly animation from the makers of *The Boss Baby*, is not *that*.

And yet, this is still recognisably A Charlie Kaufman Film. He serves only as screenwriter — first-timer Sean Charmatz has the directing reins — but Kaufman's hallmarks can be seen within minutes. Orion (voiced by Jacob Tremblay as a child and Colin Hanks as an adult) is a typically anxious Kaufman protagonist, defined by a litany of fears: bees, dogs, the ocean, “murderous gutter clowns”, and, most of all, the dark.

As in the charming children's book of the same name, by British author and illustrator Emma Yarlett, on which the film is based, Orion then meets a ghostly personification of darkness, known simply as ‘Dark’ (voiced by Paul Walter Hauser), and learns to confront his fears. Impressively, there's more here than just that one obvious lesson — something Kaufman's script itself acknowledges. Yarlett's book ran to 40 pages, aimed at preschool kids; this film takes those initial ideas and runs with them, introducing a wild meta framing device that examines, among other things, the very act of storytelling.

There are tons of bold swings here, and credit to DreamWorks Animation, who have shown a willingness to break the mould before (*The Bad Guys*, *Puss In Boots: The Last Wish*). Kaufman's script includes jokes and references that will fly over the heads of five-year-olds: Orion can be seen at one point reading a book entitled *Nihilism Vs*

*Existentialism For Kids*; there is a cheeky ribbing of other animation studios and their fondness for “dance parties”; there is, improbably, a highbrow gag about David Foster Wallace.

Charmatz's direction keeps things within DreamWorks' CG-animation house style, but brings a scruffy, scrappy approach, reflecting the mindset of its hero, in a manner similar to *The Mitchells Vs The Machines*: Orion's hand-drawn scrapbook sketches, which document his many fears, mirror the film's creative direction. Conceptually, there is a touch of Pixar's *Inside Out* to it all, in the way it anthropomorphises abstract ideas — ‘Insomnia’ and ‘Unexplained Noises’ are supporting characters here.

But to its bones, this is a Kaufman joint, and while it has an unusual sweetness — there's a wholesome father-daughter relationship — it is full of angst, big ideas, and a strong resistance to anything too neat, too Hollywood. That a major studio has allowed someone like him into the safe enclave of kiddie films should be celebrated; children need to be exposed to more of his dark materials. **JOHN NUGENT**

**VERDICT** This is that rare family-friendly film bursting with challenging themes and concepts. It's Charlie Kaufman's introspective existential dread — for kids!





Getting to know you: Newly married strangers John (Donald Glover) and Jane Smith (Maya Erskine). **Below** Sharp shooter.

TV

## MR. & MRS. SMITH

SCENES FROM A (MESSY, SECRETIVE, FAKE-ASSASSIN) MARRIAGE



OUT NOW (PRIME VIDEO) / EPISODES VIEWED 8 OF 8

**SHOWRUNNERS** Donald Glover, Francesca Sloane  
**CAST** Donald Glover, Maya Erskine, Parker Posey, Michaela Coel, John Turturro, Paul Dano, Alexander Skarsgård, Sarah Paulson, Ron Perlman

**PLOT** John (Glover) and Jane Smith (Erskine) were married before they ever met. Paired by a mysterious spy organisation, they take on deadly missions while navigating newly wedded life.

CO-CREATORS DONALD GLOVER and Francesca Sloane's take on *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* flips the 2005 Doug Liman movie on its head. That sexy, frothy blockbuster followed a married couple who discover they're both secretly working as assassins and their whole relationship has been based on lies. Here, the core couple are still undercover agents, but they enter into marriage knowing that, and pretty much only that, about each other.

Two strangers (Donald Glover and Maya Erskine) sign up to a shadowy spy agency, agreeing to abandon their past lives and begin a new one as a married couple. Renamed John and Jane Smith, their apparently regular marriage will be a cover for their missions for the agency, which involve kidnap, theft, and sometimes bloody murder. That bit they're fine with. It's the adjustment to forced intimacy that unsettles them. This is less about being a secret spy than about figuring out how to make a relationship work when your life depends on it. Imagine *Married At First Sight* with significantly higher stakes.

It's a really interesting take on the movie and one that makes sense coming from Glover, whose breakout project *Atlanta* (on which



Sloane was also a writer) was ostensibly about a rising rapper and his manager, but often more about the level of performance required to be Black in America. He doesn't make shows that can be summed up neatly. And this is not a neat show. In fact, it's often quite peculiar.

Anyone expecting the gun-and-run fun of the film will have to wait. *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* grows into a spy show as John and Jane ease into their work roles — by Episode 5 they're mowing down bad guys in Lake Como — but early on it's very talky, as these two try to figure out who they are to each other. As the spy stuff increases, so does the marital angst — two professional liars do not an easy union make.

It's an odd tone to get used to. Even with an apparently enormous budget — production values are plush and the guest roles high-wattage — it's all rather downplayed; expensive-looking set-pieces tossed aside while intimate dialogue scenes linger. But as you slip into its groove and its well-observed but not 'jokey' humour, its unpredictable weirdness becomes its charm. Glover and Erskine both play it beautifully, romcom charisma shot through with something verging on sinister. As much as you like them, it's hard to trust them. And it's that mix of mystery and madness that makes these Smiths so strangely seductive.

OLLY RICHARDS

**VERDICT** If you're expecting the movie with Brad and Angie recast, this is not that. It's turned something light and silly into a show that's dark, smart, and hard to categorise.

# also out

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## THE BEEKEEPER



"The film seems desperate to want to be in on the joke. But you're far more likely to be laughing at it than with it. Why is the former director of the CIA talking about honey? Why is an FBI special agent discussing pollination methods?" **JOHN NUGENT**

## THE BOYS IN THE BOAT



"The film [pictured] would have done better to take its own mantra to heart, and focus on the fellowship of boys in the boat. As it is, it's a pleasant introduction to a fascinating bit of history, but no world-beater." **HELEN O'HARA**

## LIFT



"By stifling Kevin Hart's seasoned comedy-fuelled charisma, this stylised crime caper is a turbulent ride. Stay for Gugu Mbatha-Raw's righteous action skills, which should propel her to bigger and bolder things." **BETH WEBB**

## GRISelda



"*Griselda* struggles to maintain its momentum in the middle episodes. Still, whatever faults the series has, Sofia Vergara is almost good enough to make you think you're watching something better." **BARRY LEVITT**

## THE TASTE OF THINGS



"The 19th-century romance between food-lover Benoît Magimel and chef Juliette Binoche is dramatically slight. But the sensual depiction of food in an exquisitely lit château kitchen is a feast for the eyes."

DAVID PARKINSON



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# THINGS WE LOVE ABOUT THE PREQUELS



SOMEHOW, *STAR WARS* RETURNED. IN 1999, *THE PHANTOM MENACE* KICKED OFF A HISTORIC AND, FRANKLY, LOOPY NEW TRILOGY. LET US CELEBRATE! MOOEY MOOEY!







Hayden  
Christensen,  
photographed  
exclusively for  
*Empire* in  
Toronto on  
24 January 2024.



A full-length photograph of actor Hayden Christensen standing against a dark background. He is wearing a long, black, high-collared coat over a dark suit and black shoes. He is leaning slightly forward with his hands in his pockets, looking towards the camera with a serious expression. A bright light source from the left creates a sharp shadow of him on the wall behind him.

# THE TRANSFORMATION

1

AS THE LEGENDARY ANAKIN SKYWALKER, IT WAS ON HAYDEN CHRISTENSEN TO SHOW US HOW AN IDEALISTIC TEENAGER LOST HIS WAY, BECOMING CINEMA'S MOST ICONIC VILLAIN. HE TALKS ABOUT TAKING ON TUSKEN RAIDERS, YOUNGLINGS, AND THE WEIGHT OF EXPECTATIONS

WORDS  
AMON WARMANN



NORMAN WONG





## THIS IS WHERE THE FUN BEGINS.

For years, we'd wondered — dreamed — how it happened. How the almost mythical figure, Anakin Skywalker — Luke's dad! — came to be clad in pitch-black armour, serving as the right-hand enforcer of galactic tyrant Emperor Palpatine, and striking fear through the hearts of everyone in the galaxy, Force-choking his way across the stars. Then finally, after over two decades of us pondering it all, George Lucas' prequel trilogy was announced, promising to answer our feverish, lingering questions.

The one chosen to play the Chosen One was Hayden Christensen, destined to lead *Star Wars* down a bold new path and bring balance and empathy to the burgeoning, fearsome Sith Lord, across 2002's *Attack Of The Clones* and 2005's *Revenge Of The Sith*. In an instant, Christensen went from being a relatively unknown 18-year-old to the focal point of cinema's biggest franchise.

Such a task would have proved too overwhelming for many, but he took it on head first, and a whole new generation embraced his Anakin. And while Christensen initially came under fire from a rabid portion of the fanbase, a reappraisal of the prequels has brought a more positive reading. Meanwhile, he has well and truly been brought back into the fold, both on screen in the *Obi-Wan Kenobi* and *Ahsoka* series on Disney+, and on stage at *Star Wars Celebrations*, where he consistently receives thunderous receptions.

Now, more than two decades since he first stepped onto the *Attack Of The Clones* set, *Empire* finds Christensen in a peaceful, relaxed mood at his Toronto home, eager to reflect and reminisce about his singular *Star Wars* journey. The fun, it seems, hasn't ended yet.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

## When did *Star Wars* first come into your life?

My earliest memories of *Star Wars* are through my older brother. I was first introduced to the characters through all the toys he had. He had everything, the Millennium Falcon, *Star Wars* bedsheets... And he was the one that showed me the films for the first time. I was 11 or 12, and I instantly became a fan as well. But it was really the merchandising that first captivated my imagination. The characters meant something to me, even before I had seen the films.

## Years later, then, how did Anakin come to you?

I was 18, and I got a call from my agent saying that they were casting for Anakin Skywalker in *Star Wars* and I thought, "Wow, how cool." But it just seemed too big. And I remember asking my agent, "Is there maybe another role that they're also casting right now that you can put me up for? Because Anakin sort of seems unattainable." And there was not. So I threw my name in the hat like everyone else.

**There were big names up for the role, including Leonardo DiCaprio. Were you**

"I WAS REALLY THRILLED THAT I WAS GONNA GET TO EXPRESS GEORGE'S MAPPING OUT OF HOW SOMEONE GOES FROM GOOD TO BAD."

**Right, top to bottom:** Anakin races towards the Tusken Raider camp on his nifty Zephyr-G swoop bike, bathed in the glow of a Tatooine double-sunset in *Attack Of The Clones*; And with mentor — and later heartbroken nemesis — Obi-Wan (Ewan McGregor).







Previous spread: Coat, Jil Sander; Polo neck, Jil Sander; Trousers, Vanze Song; Shoes, Prada at Holt Renfrew. This spread: Coat, Givenchy at VSP Consignment; Shirt, Off-White.

#### **aware of all of that at the time?**

I had heard that they'd met with Leonardo and a bunch of other actors. That just confirmed my thought that the role would go to another actor. Through the entire auditioning process I had told myself, from day one, that I wasn't going to get the part. It just wasn't a possibility. And I think that probably helped me a lot, because it just freed me up in a lot of ways. And so it really came as a surprise to me when I got the part.

#### **And when that happened, had the magnitude of what you were about to undertake already dawned on you?**

The scope of the opportunity — the enormity of it all — was exciting to me. It was obviously a little daunting too, but there's a saying: "Pressure is privilege." I just felt very lucky to have it. I was really thrilled that I was gonna get to express George's mapping out of how someone goes from good to bad.

#### **Well, the first big glimmer of that transition, or at least his unrestrained anger, is the Tusken Raider slaughter. How did you approach that scene, and Anakin admitting it to Padmé?**

Yeah, he has somewhat of an emotional breakdown. That's kind of the first time we see

that there's actually something very unstable about this character. That was a big scene.

I remember filming it and trying to find the right moment for these sorts of emotional outbursts to come. And I remember at one point, feeling like I was not finding it. So we took a little reprieve from the set and I walked away, and I went back to my dressing room to try to collect myself and think about what I was doing. And George, of his own volition, came over. He knew that I was having a tough time with the scene. And I just remember how gracious he was with me, talking me through where we were at, small adjustments that he was looking for. We were very close. And he just did it in a very sincere and heartfelt way. It was a moment where we really connected, and it was a bonding moment for us. I felt like I had the insight that I needed, and then we both walked back to set together and we did the scene that you've got in the film.

#### **Anakin killing the younglings is another big moment. How has that moment reverberated over the years — are kids scared of you when they see you out and about?**

Kids seem to forget about that scene when they meet me! There's not any fear or intimidation. They're just excited to meet Anakin. There was a lot of talk about us doing that scene, and I love

that George did it. It was a bold move. And it's shocking. When we were filming that, we were having a hard time getting the reaction that we wanted from the kid. And so I shouted, or growled at him, because we needed a genuine moment of him being startled. It got the response that we needed, and it makes that scene work really well.

#### **That poor kid, though!**

Yeah. I saw him years later. I said, "Sorry about how that went."

#### **You did a lot of great work with Ian McDiarmid. He was a seasoned stage actor — what did you learn from him?**

I just thought it was so interesting that George would cast such a nice person to play the most evil person in the universe. I really admired his ability to shift in and out of character. He would do a scene as Darth Sidious, and it was so rich and scary. And then as soon as George would say "Cut!", he was just back to being his sweet, polite self. We became quite close on *Episode III*, and he's someone that I've kept in touch with over the years. I saw him in a play a year-and-a-half ago in London, and it was so good. He's a really remarkable actor.

#### **Did you have a good dynamic with Ewan, too? Was there any parallel between master and apprentice off set?**

During *Episode II* we quickly became very close friends, but I also really looked up to him. And he took me under his wing, because he knew it was all really new to me. We spent a lot of time together hanging out just to develop a good rapport.

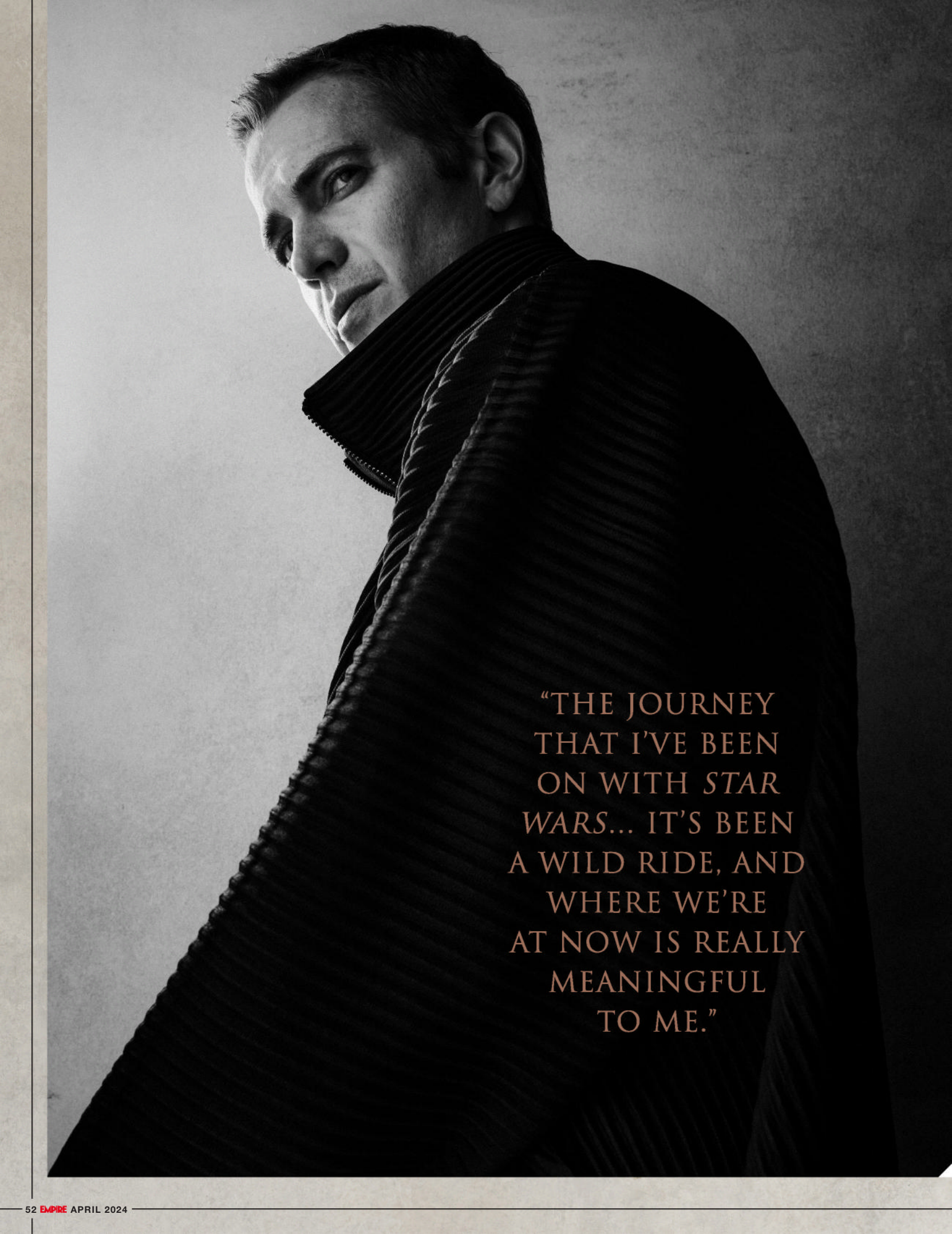
#### **When you were making these films, you were growing up in public, evolving as a person, as well as an actor. What was it like being under such scrutiny?**

It was a big adjustment for me. Everything changed pretty quickly in my life when I got cast in *Star Wars*, you know? It was an exciting time, but everything was very new. I appreciated that George Lucas went out of his way to try to help me navigate a lot of that. But there's no way of really preparing for it. You just sort of learn as you go.

#### **There's always going to be an element of negativity with characters and franchises that are this big. How challenging was that to deal with?**

Because *Star Wars* has had the cultural impact that it has, these characters almost become public domain, where people feel a sense of ownership over them. The character was criticised, my performance was criticised, and that part sucked. But I also felt like I had some context that perhaps helped a little bit. When *Episode I* came out, there was a lot of excitement that they were making a new *Star Wars*, and it was going to be the backstory of Darth Vader. But I had friends that were upset that the character was starting off as this young kid.





“THE JOURNEY  
THAT I’VE BEEN  
ON WITH *STAR  
WARS*... IT’S BEEN  
A WILD RIDE, AND  
WHERE WE’RE  
AT NOW IS REALLY  
MEANINGFUL  
TO ME.”





Left, top to bottom: With great love Padmé in *Revenge Of The Sith*; And aligned with the dark side in the form of Darth Sidious, aka Supreme Chancellor Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid).

And I watched the film, and I loved it. It was everything I wanted and more. And I didn't understand the disconnect between the movie that I saw, and the negativity in some of the reviews. In a way that sort of criticism, I think, comes from a certain failure of their own suspension of disbelief. If you're gonna go sit in a theatre, and the opening scroll starts with, "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away", that's setting the stage that anything is possible. These people don't need to sound and behave the way that we might expect. And if you're going to sit down and think that you're getting something that is of our current zeitgeist, then you're setting yourself up for something else. You know what I mean?

**I do, and I agree. And it feels like there's been a reappraisal of these movies as time has gone on. In recent years you've been onstage for numerous Star Wars Celebrations, and the reception you get is always huge. What's it been like to feel the love from the fandom?**

It's been a remarkable experience. And just a very heartwarming one. The journey that I've been on with *Star Wars* over the last 20 plus years... it's been a wild ride, and where we're at now is really meaningful to me. I think that those movies have held up well over time. It feels like vindication for the work that we did. Everyone that worked on those movies thought that we were part of something special. We all wanted to do our very best work, and we cared a lot about it. And so to see the response from the fans now, it's very cool.

**You've come back as Anakin and Darth Vader in *Obi-Wan Kenobi* and *Ahsoka*. Did you feel like you had any unfinished business with the character?**

When we finished doing the prequels, it felt like

that was it, and my journey with the character was over. So to get to come back now and do more with Anakin and Darth Vader was an amazing opportunity. I'm very grateful for the work that I got to do. The scenes that I got to do as Darth Vader on *Obi-Wan*, that was huge for me. Being able to add a little bit more connective tissue to the character and to bridge the gap into Vader a little bit more is a very worthwhile thing. And the scenes that I got to do as Anakin on *Ahsoka* was a bucket-list item I didn't even know I had.

**Had you been watching the *Clone Wars* animated series?**

I had. When I was getting ready to do *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, I started my *Clone Wars* deep-dive, and I loved it. I remember thinking, "Man, it would be so cool to see some of that in live action." In that time in Anakin's life... that was described to me by George Lucas when we were doing *Episode III*, the things that were going on in-between *Episode II* and *III*. So when Dave Filoni and Jon Favreau told me they wanted to explore some of that, I was so game. And I loved how it came out.

**And you got to play the character as he was back then. What would the Hayden Christensen of today say to the Hayden Christensen who's just about to step on the *Attack Of The Clones* set for the first time?**

Even though I was a bit overwhelmed, I was also a confident young man, and I wanted to make my mark. But I guess if I were to have some advice for me during that general time in my life, it would be: "Patience."

**Why patience?**

Because my journey with the character and with *Star Wars* has at times been a bumpy one... but I'm in a good place with it now. And so that's why I say patience.



## THE POSTER

A BOY. A DESERT.  
A SILHOUETTE.  
A MASTERPIECE

# 2

CREATING A TEASER poster for *Episode I*, one of the most anticipated films in movie history, was a huge deal for Ellen Moon Lee. She'd seen the original *Star Wars* some 30 times and was given carte blanche to find *The Phantom Menace*'s defining image.

"It was a dream project," she says now. "I could come up with anything I wanted." Working within the Lucasfilm Art Department, Lee was hired for the job 18 months before the film's release. She worked up around 15 ideas, including variations on 'SWI', Lucasfilm's inside name for the project, and "some ideas with the double lightsaber in there".

Sifting through tons of existing photographic material, Lee struck gold. "All the actors were documented in costume," she says. "There was one where the little boy [Jake Lloyd] isn't even looking at the camera. It was unusual." Key to the success of her idea was the shadow. "The silhouette was very simplified. It was meant to be a fast read. It was then just Photoshopped together."

The *Phantom Menace* teaser poster, marking a change from the series' painterly poster tradition, was released on 10 November 1998. It became an instant pop-culture touch-point — "I think Maggie casting the shadow in *The Simpsons* is hilarious," says Lee — and subsequently took up permanent residence in the world's imagination. "It has to do with its simplicity, its quietness and foreboding," says Lee about the power of the image. "The original design of Darth Vader is truly iconic. His silhouette is unmistakable." Foreshadowing, indeed.

IAN FREER





**Top to bottom:** Gungan leader Boss Nass (Brian Blessed) has the gift of the gab; Sitting down on the job; Hanging out with Jar Jar Binks (Ahmed Best); Clutching a glowy orb, one of the perks of being the Boss.

# 3 THE MIGHTY BOSS NASS

BRIAN BLESSED SPEAKS — WELL, BOOMS — TO US ABOUT THE FORMIDABLE GUNGAN LEADER

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

"IT TOOK YOUR bloody head off!" bellows Brian Blessed down the phone line, as only he can. The legendarily bushy-bearded 87-year-old actor is recounting for *Empire* the first time he saw *Star Wars*: in 1977, having been made aware of the film from a "great big billboard at Snow Hill railway station in Birmingham", Blessed sallied forth to the first cinema he could find. An avowed science-fiction nerd and keen space enthusiast — "I am actually a fully trained astronaut", he notes several times during our conversation — he found himself transfixed. "Here was something totally, completely original. It was by far the finest science-fiction film I'd ever seen."

Blessed hoped to be cast in the original trilogy, but suspects his iconic role in the similarly space-operatic *Flash Gordon* in 1980 may have gotten in the way. It wasn't until the late '90s, with *The Phantom Menace* entering pre-production, that he finally secured a meeting with George Lucas. "They were keen for me to be in it. They wanted me to be a Jedi called Bibbles," he says, misremembering the character Sio Bibble, the governor of Naboo, who would ultimately be played by Oliver Ford Davies. It was obvious to all that Blessed's famously larger-than-life persona could not be contained by the softly spoken administrator. "George said, 'You're not remotely



## 4

## DARTH MAUL'S TERRIFYING VISAGE

ARTIST IAIN MCCAIG CHARTS THE EVOLUTION OF A MONSTER



Above: Who's the Boss? Blessed in action on set.

right for Bibbles, Brian. You've got too much power. You've got too much energy."

A more suitable role was soon found: Gungan leader Boss Nass, the fearsome and full-jowled alien who rules Gunga City on the planet of Naboo. Blessed, who first received his pages for the script "through a fucking old-fashioned, broken-down fax machine in Wiltshire", admits to initially being baffled by the pidgin dialect of the Gungans. "I thought they were Jamaicans!" he laughs. "Gradually, you could see it had a language all of its own — an ancient language."

It was not until filming began, however, that the actor himself established Boss Nass' idiosyncrasies. During the scene in which the character finally agrees to join the fight with Queen Amidala and the Jedi, Lucas — apparently concerned the moment was "a bit boring" — asked the actor to jazz it up. "George said, 'Can you do something for me, Brian? Can you do something totally original? A special effect of some kind?' 'Yeah, George! I remember going [*speaking at an incredible volume*], 'MEEEEESAH LIKA DISS!' And I did this huge, wonderful wobble with my face. George said, 'You mad bastard, Brian! That's *exactly* what I want!'" During the filming of this scene, Ewan McGregor and Liam Neeson reportedly struggled to keep straight faces.

A self-described "expert on amphibians", Blessed drew much of his inspiration for this distinctly alien performance from nature. "I do a tremendous amount of work on various crocodiles," he says, entirely seriously. "And so therefore, I studied certain reactions." He also entered into "a study about noises that I felt dinosaurs would make". As he summarises, as succinctly as he is able to, "You can't just turn up there and just do a voice. That's bollocks!"

So, a legend was born. At the Los Angeles premiere of Disney's *Tarzan*, released a month after *The Phantom Menace*, crowds, claims Blessed, were chanting, "Boss Nass! Boss Nass!" to him.

He looks back on the whole experience with nothing but fondness. "Every day, I raced to the studio to be there," he says. "I have never known such ecstasy, artistically."

After *Flash Gordon*, Boss Nass remains the role most revered by his fans. There is some similarity, he explains. "The energy that I use as Vultan in *Flash Gordon*, I bring very much to *The Phantom Menace*. Not sitting there on your arse and just being meditative and quiet and still. NO! I bring great energy to the whole fucking thing. I love it. I just love science-fiction." Or, as Boss Nass would say: heesa lika diss.



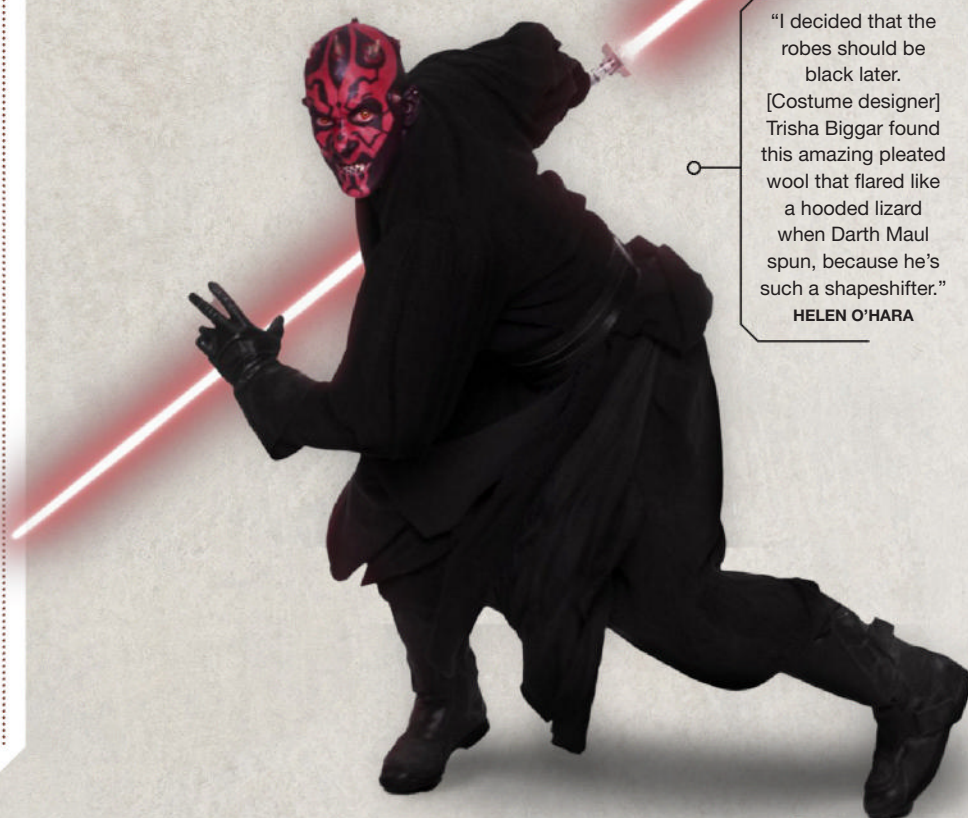
"I kept thinking, 'Is it all guys in this movie? Let's have some women.' So I drew this, which George really liked, but he wasn't going with that for Maul. Years later, when they were doing *Clone Wars*, suddenly this became Maul's mother, Mother Talzin."

"The script said Darth Maul was 'a vision from your worst nightmare'. Mine was this: dead white face, metallic teeth, glistening eyes, watching me from my third-floor window."



"I spent the first year trying to out-helmet Darth Vader. It nearly drove me crazy because it's a perfect design. I finally tried to connect the face to the helmet and put a stylised circuit on a face."

"I found a way to paint an expression on his face. He's got to be almost scowling, almost smiling — a Mona Lisa smile. In some ways it's a stylised muscle pattern; in some ways a Rorschach pattern."



"I decided that the robes should be black later. [Costume designer] Trisha Biggar found this amazing pleated wool that flared like a hooded lizard when Darth Maul spun, because he's such a shapeshifter."

HELEN O'HARA





## THE CONCEPT

George Lucas has always had a need for speed. The man behind 1973 hot-rod classic *American Graffiti* is an avid F1 fan — so it's hardly surprising that when he set about plotting an action set-piece for *The Phantom Menace*, his mind drifted to racing. "George told us three years before filming started that he wanted a race," says Rick McCallum, Lucas' producer on the prequels. "He freaked us out slightly by saying the vehicles should go at 600mph..." Thus was born the Boonta Eve Podrace, taking place in the Tatooine desert of Mos Espa, in which pre-teen slave — and surprisingly capable driver — Anakin Skywalker (Jake Lloyd) would win his freedom. Lucas wanted to blend the glamour and danger of *Ben-Hur*'s chariot race with the spiky, ultra-competitive trash-talking associated with street racing. "It started off as a two-minute sequence," laughs McCallum. "But as new ideas were thrown in, it went to six minutes, then nine. Those 'drag-racing' bits at the start are some of my favourites — the drivers looking at each other, like, 'Fuck you, man, I'm gonna beat you...'"

# 5

ICONIC SEQUENCE

## THE PODRACE

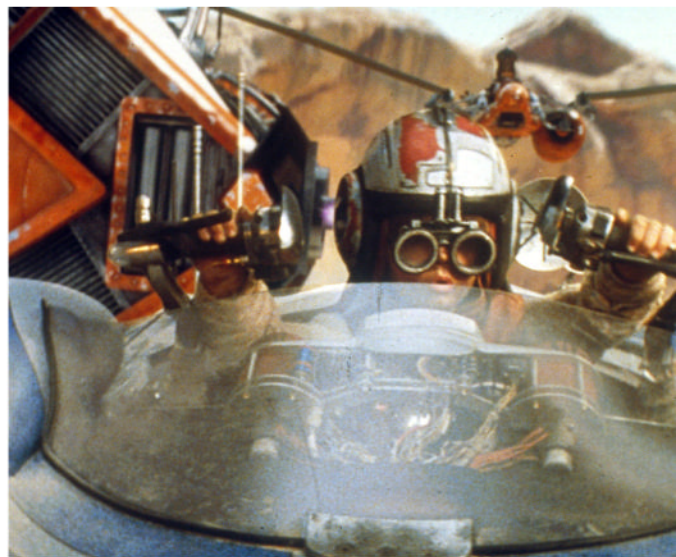
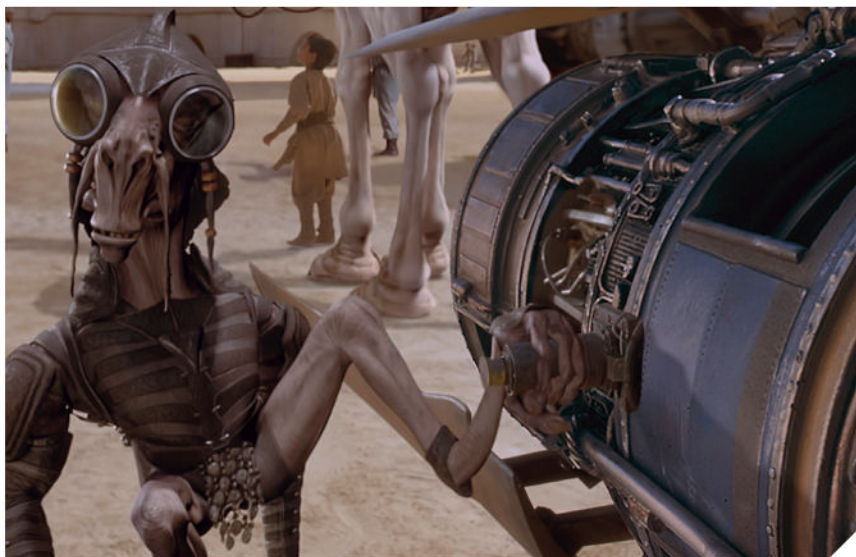
WE BREAK DOWN *THE PHANTOM MENACE*'S WACKY RACE

WORDS **TOM ELLEN** ADDITIONAL REPORTING **HELEN O'HARA**

## THE RACERS

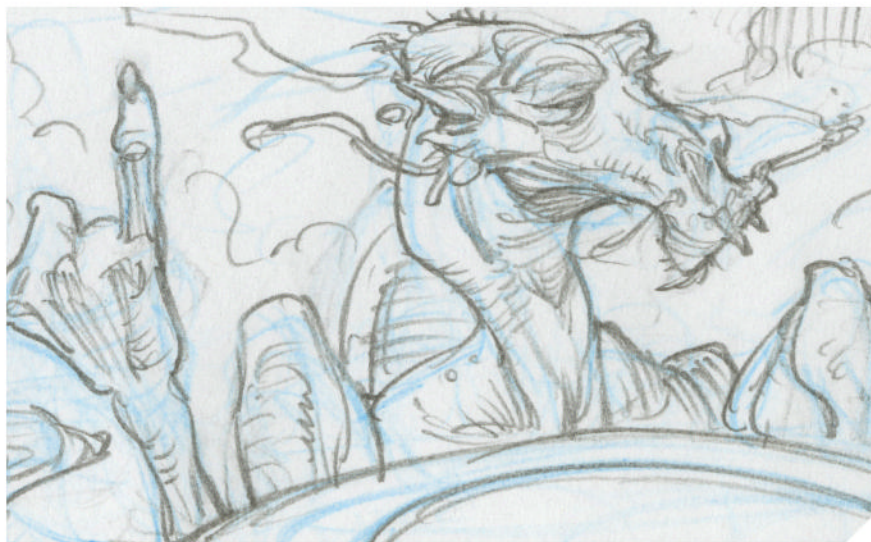
From the get-go, Anakin was to be the only human competitor. "George wanted characters from all over the galaxy," explains McCallum. Creature designer Terry Whitlatch was tasked with concocting this cavalcade of interstellar wacky racers, each with their own personality and driving style. "My favourite is Sebulba," says McCallum of the arrogant, jowly speedster. "He's

such a scumbag. Terry made him look like an old camel she'd seen at Oakland Zoo." Other notables include wisecracking double-faced announcer Fode and Beed ("One of the first ideas we had was a two-headed commentator/co-commentator," remembers McCallum), and hapless cushion-faced amateur Ben Quadinaros, whose vehicle explodes before he can get out of first gear. "A character like Ben might start with



Getty Images





George rejecting an initial design, but telling the artist to keep the eyes and forehead," McCallum explains. "The artist would then keep working around those elements, and a month later, the character is born."

## THE VEHICLES

"Each pod looks different and has its own unique sound," says McCallum of the vehicles. "In the race itself, the pods are all digitally fabricated, but we built real miniatures, models and even full-size versions for the starting-line shots, so the VFX artists could see them from all angles, and work out the logic of how they moved." As well as the magnetic cables connecting the hulking engines, the pods were fully customisable, as demonstrated by Sebulba's addition of an illicit flamethrower. "George [would] lean back in his chair with his eyes closed and tell us [each] scene," recalls concept designer Iain McCaig. "We storyboarded the heck out of this sequence." That said, it very nearly didn't happen. Having spent ten weeks constructing Mos Espa in western Tunisia, a freak hurricane hit the night before shooting. "It was a once-in-a-thousand-years thing," says McCallum. "The

pods — which weighed as much as trucks — were blown hundreds of yards away. Luckily, the Tunisian army were on hand and they helped us get everything back." Use the (Armed) Force.

## THE SOUND

One of the most striking things about the sequence is the almost total lack of music. For the most part, there are no swelling strings, no thumping drums — all we get is the alien screeches and wails of the vehicles as they hurtle across the plains. "We love music, and we usually always rely on John Williams to save us," laughs McCallum. "But for the race, it was always the plan to have the sounds of the vehicles stand out. Each pod has its own signature sound, which then had to be manipulated as the vehicle passed through a cave or a canyon." Sound designer Ben Burtt compiled a vast sonic library — everything from Porsches, Ferraris and Formula One cars to airplanes and sirens, most of which ended up in the movie. "We also used odd sounds, like knives hitting kitchen sinks," explains McCallum. "The idea was that the sound would be 50 per cent of the whole experience." Those screaming engines are still reverberating.



## 6 DUEL OF THE FATES

JOHN WILLIAMS STRIKES BACK

NO 'BEST LIGHTSABER Fights' list is complete without Darth Maul versus Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi, and John Williams' 'Duel Of The Fates' score takes it to hyperspace. The anthemic earworm begins with an attention-commanding brass fanfare that heralds Maul's arrival, and only gets more thrilling from there. The 88-piece choir and the orchestra span the full spectrum from hushed to thunderous, with Williams' repeated, ferocious melody bringing ominous atmosphere, and a propulsion that builds in intensity as the fight continues. Meanwhile, Sanskrit chants add to the sense of pagan religiosity that gives the track its mysterious vibe and a sense of inevitability. It's rare for a piece of score to transcend its origins, but 'Duel Of The Fates' earned that distinction. And then some. **AMON WARMANN**



## 7 LEONARDO DICAPRIO'S SHOPPING SPREE

BECAUSE EVEN THE ONE-TIME ANAKIN CONTENDER WAS HOOKED

SUPERYACHTS. OSCARS. LAVISH parties. The life of Leonardo DiCaprio is hardly relatable. But back in 1999, he was just like us: hooked on *Star Wars* toys. The tie-in merch deluge for *The Phantom Menace* was vast, and at 1.30am on May the third (so close), DiCaprio was papped in the Santa Monica branch of Toys R Us, buying a trolley-load of *Episode I* collectibles. He got an Amidala doll. He got a Trade Federation Droid Fighter. And yes, he got a classic yellow N-1 Starfighter. Excitement for *Star Wars*' return was inescapable even in the upper echelons of Hollywood (though DiCaprio reportedly turned down the chance to play Anakin). We hope he didn't kick the habit — anyone else reckon the LEGO *Star Wars* UCS Venator was top of his 2023 Christmas list? **BEN TRAVIS**







“SAY SOMETHING ’BOUT the motherfuckin’ prequels, bitch,” spat Natalie Portman, aiming a gun at some cowering sap’s face.

Portman has had quite the journey with *Star Wars*. She was 15 when cast as Queen Amidala, joining the saga as a wide-eyed but wise actor, having already worked with Luc Besson, Michael Mann, Woody Allen and Tim Burton. The rest is galactic history: the trilogy did gangbusters, but not without criticism, which Portman addressed in 2018’s potty-mouthed rap skit for *Saturday Night Live* when, dressed once more to the nines as Naboo royalty, she took haters to task. But there was always going to be risk.

“I was worried about doing it,” she says now of *Star Wars*, “that I wouldn’t be able to do anything else after, because the series carries such a mythology in American life. But that was precisely why it was such an incredible opportunity.” As wannabe assassin Mathilda in Besson’s *Léon*, Portman had taken no prisoners, and Lucas, he said, needed someone commanding, who could convey strength as Amidala, the put-upon 14-year-old figurehead. Let alone the fact that it was essentially a dual performance, taking in the off-duty Padmé too.

“I was thrilled by the opportunity to play two different roles and also to play a young, female leader,” says Portman. “Both were quite unusual opportunities for a 16-year-old actress.” Her stately performance as the queen was almost as otherworldly as the surrounding aliens, Portman gracefully gliding through the galaxy. “When I was in Japan doing press for *Léon* as a 13-year-old, I had the opportunity to see Kabuki theatre,” she explains of her *Phantom Menace* physicality. “When I saw the designs for the costumes and hair and make-up for Queen Amidala, I immediately thought of that. I tried to use some of the ways I observed the characters moving their eyes, the slow and regal way they moved their bodies, as inspiration for the role.”

Amidala’s gravelly, transatlantic tones

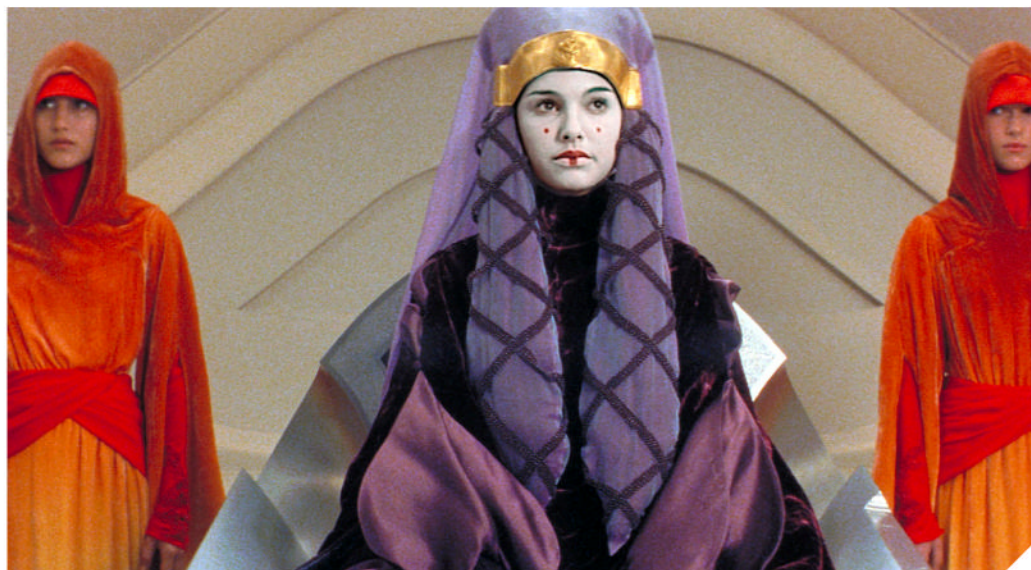


# 8 THE STATELY SPACE QUEEN

NATALIE PORTMAN REMINISCES ABOUT HER ASTRAL ADVENTURE

WORDS ALEX GODFREY





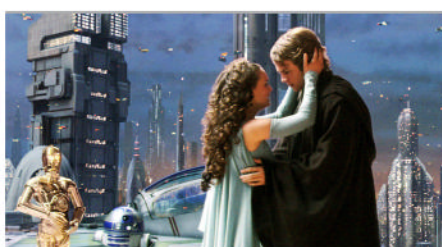
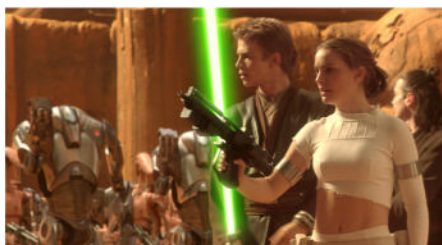
were inspired by Lauren Bacall and Katharine Hepburn, whom Portman studied, and Lucas asked her to deepen Amidala's vocals too. She thought she'd done that enough, but apparently not. "I was surprised when I saw the film," she remembers, "because they digitally altered my voice and brought it down in register!" George, you tinkerer.

*The Phantom Menace* felt like new territory for Portman: yes, she'd notched up enviable credits for heavyweight directors, but she'd always been treated on sets like a youngling. In the UK, the kid gloves were off. "It was hard for me," she recalls. "Because at 16, I was on adult working laws in London, while I was still on child labour laws in the US. So, suddenly I was working much longer hours. I think until then it felt like I was a kid playing. This was when I realised it was work."

Bewildering work at that. The first time she saw *The Phantom Menace* was at London's Royal Film Performance in July 1999 (where the then Prince Charles asked her if she'd been in the original trilogy. "No," she told him. "I'm 18"). The film being her inaugural experience with green screen, Portman was agog watching herself in environments she hadn't been in, interacting with creatures she'd never seen. "It was somewhat akin to seeing pictures of a vacation you haven't been on," she says. "Feeling like you have a sort of memory lapse."

A few weeks later, she went to university. With the next two instalments on the way, she had what you might call a bit of job security and, *Star Wars* aside, ditched acting for the next four years, instead embarking on a psychology degree at Harvard. She enrolled under her birth name, Natalie Hershlag, filming *Attack Of The Clones* and *Revenge Of The Sith* in her summer holidays. With prequel fever taking the world by storm, here was a clear parallel: the public-facing Queen Amidala and Natalie Portman, movie star, and the private Padmé and Natalie Hershlag, diligent student.

"Yes, there was a sort of double life to it," she agrees. "I was very lucky that social media didn't exist yet and it was just the early days of the internet. I was able to be relatively anonymous at school while having this crazy experience outside of school. It was a very weird



**Top left:** Padmé Amidala (Natalie Portman) in *The Phantom Menace*. **Here, top to bottom:** Regal in purple; With Anakin (Hayden Christensen) in *Attack Of The Clones*; Sharing worries with Obi-Wan (Ewan McGregor) in *Revenge Of The Sith*; Saying goodbye in *Sith*. **Below left:** Relaxed in *Clones*.

split in my life, but also lucky that I was able to have an unfettered college experience."

She didn't leave the prequels completely unscathed — criticism of the films knocked her confidence, but that quickly repaired with roles in Anthony Minghella's *Cold Mountain* (2003) and Mike Nichols' *Closer* (2004). And today she looks back on *Star Wars* warmly. "It bridged my career from a child to an adult," she says, considering herself "so lucky to get to hop on the legacy" that Lucas had built. And remember — say something 'bout the motherfuckin' prequels and you will rue the day.



9

## THE HYPE

FORMER AIN'T IT COOL  
NEWS WRITER  
DREW McWEENY ON  
PREQUEL FEVER

I JUST RECENTLY found my physical copy of 'The Beginning', the script I reviewed on *Ain't It Cool* that got me banned from Skywalker Ranch for over a decade. At the time I wrote about it, it was one of four physical copies of the full *Phantom Menace* script anywhere (hence that working title). If you didn't live through the dark times after *Return Of The Jedi*, you don't understand. *Star Wars* was dead. For yeeeeeeears. The announcement that they were finally making new films drove me a little crazy. I wasn't alone. I lived two blocks from Hollywood's Chinese Theatre, where a small army of lunatics lined up on the street for a full month. The internet was still relatively new and this created a new level of online frenzy. Being one of the primary accurate conduits of *Star Wars* rumours to the public was like playing a daily contact sport, and I loved every minute of it. Script reviews aside, Lucasfilm embraced this weird new online landscape with daily images and behind-the-scenes video, and an entire ecosystem of scoop-driven websites erupted to give people a daily drip of peeks at the galaxy far, far away that we thought we'd never see again. No matter what people ended up thinking of *The Phantom Menace*, living through that summer as a fan and as a reporter was dizzying and delightful — maybe the single greatest concentration of fan energy that we will ever see. **DREW McWEENY**



**Top to bottom:** Stormtroopers line up at the London premiere of *Revenge Of The Sith*; *Ain't It Cool News*, one of the major purveyors of trusted info on this whole new *Star Wars* adventure back in the '90s.







# 10 THE INIMITABLE QUI-GON JINN

LIAM NEESON ON PLAYING THE JEDI'S JEDI

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

QUI-GON'S NOBLE end, as we all know, came at the hands, and blade, of Darth Maul, the Jedi Master breathing his last on the cold floor of the Plasma Refinery Complex in Naboo. Somebody had to lose the Duel Of The Fates, after all.

Qui-Gon's noble beginning, by stark contrast, came when Liam Neeson sat down with George Lucas in a London restaurant. The purpose of the meeting was, ostensibly, to discuss the possibility of Neeson starring in the first *Star Wars* movie in over a decade. "Really all we talked about over lunch was the rearing of our children," recalls Neeson of the "very practical and cool"

Lucas. "*Star Wars* was not mentioned once."

Clearly, though, something about Neeson impressed Lucas. Perhaps it was his track record of playing inspirational, galvanising central figures, like Oskar Schindler in *Schindler's List*, Michael Collins in *Michael Collins*, and Dr Peyton Westlake in *Darkman*. Perhaps it was his quiet-spoken air of authority. Perhaps Neeson tried to pay for the meal by simply waving his hand at the waiter. Whatever it was, Lucas offered him the role of Qui-Gon Jinn, Obi-Wan Kenobi's master and the lead of what would become *The Phantom Menace*.

*The Phantom Menace* featured Jedi of all shapes and sizes, but Qui-Gon stood out from the crowd right away. Tall, imposing, he looked like a million credits — waves of long hair spilling down his shoulders, wispy chin-strap beard, wearing Lucas' samurai influences on his sleeves. "The costume was very functional," says Neeson. "Loose-fitting for lightsaber-fighting purposes, plus a magnificent cloak. I would've liked to use my own north of Ireland accent much more, but I adopted a general English accent." (Though those paying close attention may be able to detect Neeson's natural accent peeking through from time to time.)

But it wasn't just how he looked or sounded that set Qui-Gon apart. There's a reason why



**Top:** The venerable Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson). **Above:** Neeson on set of *The Phantom Menace*.



11

## THE COUGHING GENERAL

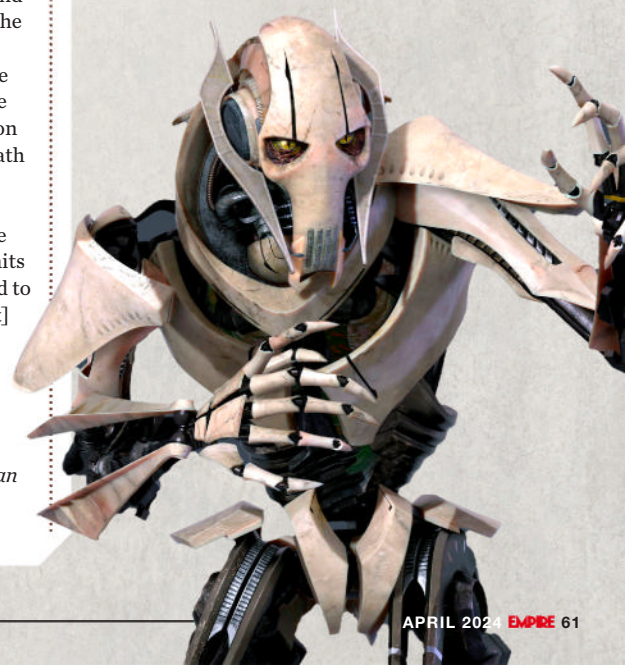
IN PRAISE OF GRIEVOUS, THE SIX-LIMBED MANIAC



PART-TERMINATOR, PART-octopus, part-Muppet, the Sith's goofiest warrior has become an internet favourite. His mere presence raises infinite questions. Why does a cyborg wear a cape? Why the cough? How come he has the eyes of a snake? Did he start off as a humble Cadet Grievous, slowly rising up the military ranks? Seriously, why's he got a cape?

Frankly, such mysteries only add to his aura of slithery cool. His backstory suggests he was trained in his dark arts by Count Dooku, raising the enjoyable image of Christopher Lee scowling as he watches Grievous practising his villainous scuttle. The robo-rotter's behind-the-scenes backstory is just as colourful: originally the role was earmarked for Gary Oldman, who revealed recently while promoting *Slow Horses* that he even recorded the dialogue, only to see it all ditched due to union regulations.

We never did get Gary Grievous, but Matthew Wood did a fine job with the growly, Gonzo-esque vocals — and the coughs came courtesy of George Lucas himself, who visited the recording-studio one day with a heavy cold. Although Grievous appears in only one instalment, the lightsabers-twirling, sci-fi-Peloton-riding, endlessly flamboyant end-result is undeniable: he's a bold one! **NICK DE SEMLYEN**



**Top to bottom:** Qui-Gon chats to a young Anakin Skywalker (Jake Lloyd) while Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) looks on; Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan join (lightsaber) forces.

"Acting is always an act of the imagination," says Neeson now of *The Phantom Menace*. "That was very much the case, imagining weird animals and beings. When we shot my scene with Watto, I was acting to a tennis ball on a stick being moved by a crew member. It was interesting to see wires coming out from cameras going into laptop computers being operated by nerds." Those nerds, along with Ahmed Best, were charged with bringing Jar Jar Binks to life — as most of his scenes are with Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, Neeson and Ewan McGregor had a front-row seat, and were totally unprepared for the offensive that came later. "Ahmed was so funny and inventive," says Neeson. "Myself and Ewan were personally hurt and offended by the critical reaction to the character."

As anyone who rushed out, shortly before *The Phantom Menace* was released, to buy the soundtrack found out to their horror, Qui-Gon would be a Qui-Goner (the glib reveal of his death in John Williams track titles like 'Qui-Gon's Noble End' or 'Qui-Gon's Funeral' may have irrevocably changed the way plot details were parsed to the public). "It was an appeal," admits Neeson, though. "I'm delighted and honoured to be part of George's mythical storytelling [But] I didn't quite fancy signing up for two or three potential sequels."

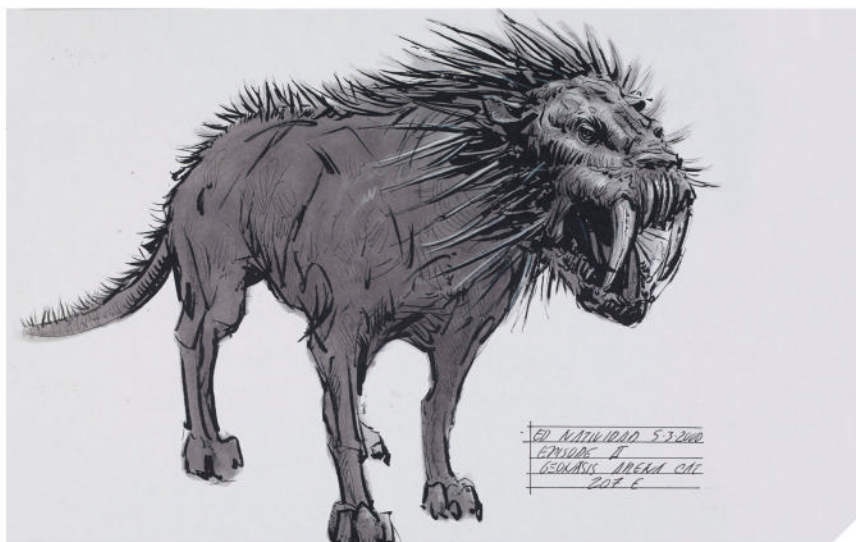
And he's been true to his word. There have been a couple of voice cameos here and there, and a Force ghost appearance alongside his old pal McGregor in the *Obi-Wan Kenobi* series. But by and large, Qui-Gon's Noble End has remained just that.

Lucas decided to start his prequel trilogy by focusing on a Jedi who wasn't Obi-Wan or Anakin; who was also not a part of the Jedi Council. Twenty-five years on, Qui-Gon's approach to Jedihood remains compelling and open to debate. He is, by turns, a textbook Jedi — remaining calm under pressure, dispensing endless self-help gobbledegook, confident that "there's always a bigger fish" — and then a complete maverick. "The rebellious nature was scripted," says Neeson. "His main rebellious deed was to see in Anakin this potentially important future Jedi. Qui-Gon was determined to let the Jedi Council know that Anakin was special."

So taken is he by Anakin's potential, after meeting the young boy on Tatooine, that Qui-Gon pulls the kind of shady shit that would have made Yoda levitate the rulebook at him. He gambles. He flirts a little with Anakin's mum. He tells the odd porky pie. He out-Wattos Watto. And, of course, he defies the Jedi Council's order to leave well alone. Qui-Gon is never in danger of turning to the dark side of the Force, but he deals in shades of good deal greyer than most of his comrades. His fate is a lesson about the dangers of impetuosity for a young Obi-Wan.

As a young man, Neeson had appeared in a couple of fantasy flicks (*Excalibur* and *Krull*). Once you've been in a scene where Bernard Bresslaw is playing a cyclops, it seems that adjusting to CG characters is a relative breeze.





## THE SCALE

After the challenge of conjuring a 600mph tear through an alien desert, the production team had hoped for a bit of a breather on *Attack Of The Clones*. “George promised us: ‘Episode II is a love story, there won’t be anywhere near the same level of [visual] challenges,’” laughs McCallum. “And then... he tells us about Geonosis.” In creating the vast Petranaki Arena — in which Obi-Wan, Anakin and Padmé are sentenced to death on the planet Geonosis — the designers, looking for some Ancient Roman splendour, once more went back to *Ben-Hur*. “With anything big, cinematically, the first place you go is *Ben-Hur*,” grins McCallum. “It’s such a classic that we always go back and try to steal from it.” A soundstage was promptly erected to represent the gladiatorial stadium, with three vast stakes in the centre, entirely encircled by blue screen, onto which would be projected hundreds of thousands of chanting, screaming Geonosians (their design based on winged termites). “The whole thing had to look — and feel — *huge*,” says McCallum. Mission very much accomplished.



# 12 THE BATTLE OF GEONOSIS

ICONIC SEQUENCE

ATTACK OF THE CLONES' EPIC ARENA BRAWL

WORDS **TOM ELLEN** ADDITIONAL REPORTING **HELEN O'HARA**

## THE BEASTS

Chained to those stakes in the middle of the arena, our heroes are faced down by three cool-looking — but not overly friendly — creatures. “They all have different personalities,” says McCallum. “The Reek [the rhino-like monster] is just dumb: he’ll chase anything, he’ll even trample his own

guys. The Nexu — who’s cat-like, yet reptilian, with his long tail — he’s smart. He waits patiently for Padmé at the base of the stake. And the Acklay is smart too, but vicious — the way he stabs with his claws! He’s an incredible fucking character.” Concept designer Iain McCaig offers some additional insight

Lucasfilm







into the Acklay's visual style: "I'd designed a praying-mantis style creature, and a velociraptor-style creature, and a whole pile of things," he tells us. "I spread them out on the table, and George came in and said, 'I'll have the head of this one on the body of this one.' He ripped the head off the velociraptor [sketch], and put it on the mantis. And that was the Acklay."

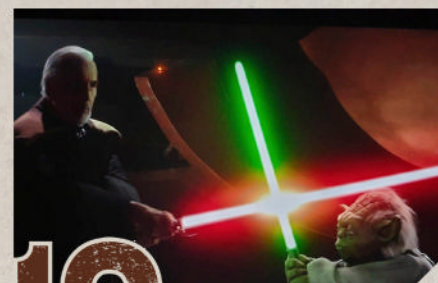
## THE JEDI

The arrival of 212 Jedi Knights to rescue Ani, Padmé and Obi-Wan from the Petranaki Arena marks not only the largest deployment of Jedi since the High Republic era — two centuries before the film is set — but also the spark that will go on to ignite the Clone Wars. "We shot each individual Jedi from two angles while they performed their fight movements," McCallum recalls, "and then we [composed] them all together in the arena to look like hundreds of fights happening at the same time." The sight — and sound — of all those lightsabers swishing and pulsing at once is arguably the highlight of the whole sequence. "The sound work in that battle is just incredible," says

McCallum. "It was the most laser sounds in any scene we'd ever done."

## THE MANDALORIAN

Of the many deaths at the Battle of Geonosis, one stands out above all: that of Beskar-armoured bounty hunter Jango Fett. Having just been trampled on by the marauding Reek, Fett is promptly beheaded in front of his son-slash-clone (long story) Boba by Samuel L. Jackson's Mace Windu. "Right from the start of working on *Episode II* we planned to have that moment of motivation for Boba Fett," McCallum explains. "That great image of him picking up his father's helmet — you just know he's going to go after these guys for killing his dad." As well as providing a neatly potted origin story for one of *Star Wars*' best-loved bad guys, the scene also ticked another important box for the production team. "We had to have Sam Jackson kill someone spectacularly," McCallum laughs, of the Master Windu-inflicted lightsaber swipe that leaves Jango headless. "We only ever got Sam for a week or two at a time while we were shooting. So, when you do get Sam, you *have* to give him a spectacular killing scene." This is indeed the way.



# 13

## YODA VS DOOKU

REMEMBERING THE GALAXY'S BOUNCIEST SMACKDOWN

BUT A NUMBER, age is. The final reel of *Attack Of The Clones* is proof that you're never too old to throw down — Christopher Lee was 80-odd when he unleashed Count Dooku's (or, Darth Tyranus') Sith Lord skills. And Yoda? Well, he wasn't far off 900, still managing to front-flip and back-flip and twirl his way through a lightsaber battle that blew minds back in 2002. The original trilogy's puppet Yoda holds the character's fuzzy-felt heart, but his CGI iteration in *Clones* proved much more nimble — no longer restricted to being Luke Skywalker's backpack, able to careen across the screen and prove his status as an all-out Jedi Master. Lee, meanwhile, relishes every 'saber-swipe, in a duel that could previously only have played out in fanboys' dreams. **BEN TRAVIS**



## JAR JAR BINKS

ALLOW US TO MAKE THE CASE

# 14

JUSTICE FOR JAR JAR. When *The Phantom Menace* debuted, *Star Wars* fans did not react well to Ahmed Best's gangly Gungan. They wanted Jedi being cool. They got a big-eared, blithering buffoon. Lucas chopped Jar Jar's screen time for *Attack Of The Clones* and *Revenge Of The Sith*, but those films could have done with more of Jar Jar Binks' playful slapstick to mitigate the murk of Anakin's downfall. Jar Jar, like the Ewoks, was a character conceived by Lucas to appeal to the younglings and, if you've ever had the chance to watch him with a child, boy does he hit that demographic. They *love* him, and so should we. After years of being a (literal) fall guy, he deserves a renaissance. Maybe even his own show. 'Tis demanded by the gods, it is. **CHRIS HEWITT**







Costume designer Trisha Biggar went the extra parsec for her magnificent work on the prequels. This striking image is reminiscent of Queen Amidala's Senate gown. The headdress is lifted almost wholesale from Mongolian royal hairpieces, though the colours of the gown are more Chinese and the make-up influenced by geisha. Also, the out-sized shoulder pads here are giant enough to make Joan Crawford green with envy. It's a look that projects power, authority and an unfathomable ability to carry off enormous hats.

Aside from the lack of colour, this is Padmé's famous *Clones* Lake dress — that one heavy on the yellow and pink — fully formed. The drop shoulders, Grecian draping and gathered front are all present and correct, and she even sports the bulky, shell-like coil of hair. Only those sunset ombre colours had to be adjusted later. The floaty, sheer fabric and tougher metal accents make it one of Padmé's most alluring looks — just the thing to wear in a romantic location where you're repeatedly telling some guy that you two really shouldn't consider starting a relationship.

15

# PHANTOM THREADS

SLAY, QUEEN! WE REVISIT AMIDALA'S GRANDEST GARB

WORDS HELEN O'HARA

In this get-up, richly coloured and strategically padded, Amidala looks far older and more impressive than her years. That sweep across her shoulders recalls Chinese imperial robes, broadening her tiny frame, though the hair and make-up are almost otherworldly. This sketch is a good example of how Padmé uses clothing strategically, to project authority beyond her years but also to camouflage her emotions and even her identity at times. As Miles Morales learned, anyone can wear the mask.

With the relaxed hair — for once — and drapery shapes, this became a look for Padmé when off-duty, hiding out in Tatooine and about to hear Anakin's horrific confession about the Tusken Raiders. Not the best holiday ever. Originally this was designed for one of the handmaidens in *Episode I*, with sleeves drawn from both Chinese and medieval traditions, and a Fortuny-style pleated under-dress with embroidery that references Naboo's sun symbol. Even Padmé's casual wear is fancier than 99 per cent of wedding dresses.



# THE GLITZY BIT-PARTS

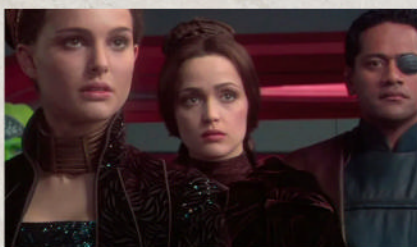
HIDDEN AMONG THE A-LISTERS, THESE FUTURE STARS WERE JUST BIDDING THEIR TIME...



**KEIRA KNIGHTLEY** *THE PHANTOM MENACE*  
A 12-year-old Knightley made her movie debut as Amidala's bodyguard — and lookalike decoy — Sabé. Bend it like Padmé.



**RICHARD ARMITAGE** *THE PHANTOM MENACE*  
The one-day Thorin Oakenshield spent one day filming and apparently couldn't find himself in the film. Freeze-frame, Richard!



**ROSE BYRNE** *ATTACK OF THE CLONES*  
Another of Amidala's doubles, Byrne played Dormé (who, in later comic books, swore revenge after her mistress' death).



**SOFIA COPPOLA** *THE PHANTOM MENACE*  
Coppola was only on set to watch her dad's friend George work, but he asked if she fancied joining the royal entourage. Result.



**CELIA IMRIE** *THE PHANTOM MENACE*  
As Naboo fighter pilot Dineé Ellberger, Imrie distinguishes herself in battle. Also, her line delivery of, "Roger, Bravo Leader," is on point.



**DOMINIC WEST** *THE PHANTOM MENACE*  
This palace guard? None other than *The Wire*'s Jimmy McNulty. As Jerus Jannick, he's *Star Wars*' second most famous J.J..



**SALLY HAWKINS** *THE PHANTOM MENACE*  
Hawkins was an extra digitally cloned to fill out the throng. She'd later be Oscar-nominated. But not for this.



**E.T. AND CHUMS** *THE PHANTOM MENACE*  
In E.T.'s tongue, "Phone home," translates as, "My representative in the Galactic Senate is Senator Grebleips." **JAMES DYER**



# 17 OBI-WAN KENOBI'S EPIC JOURNEY

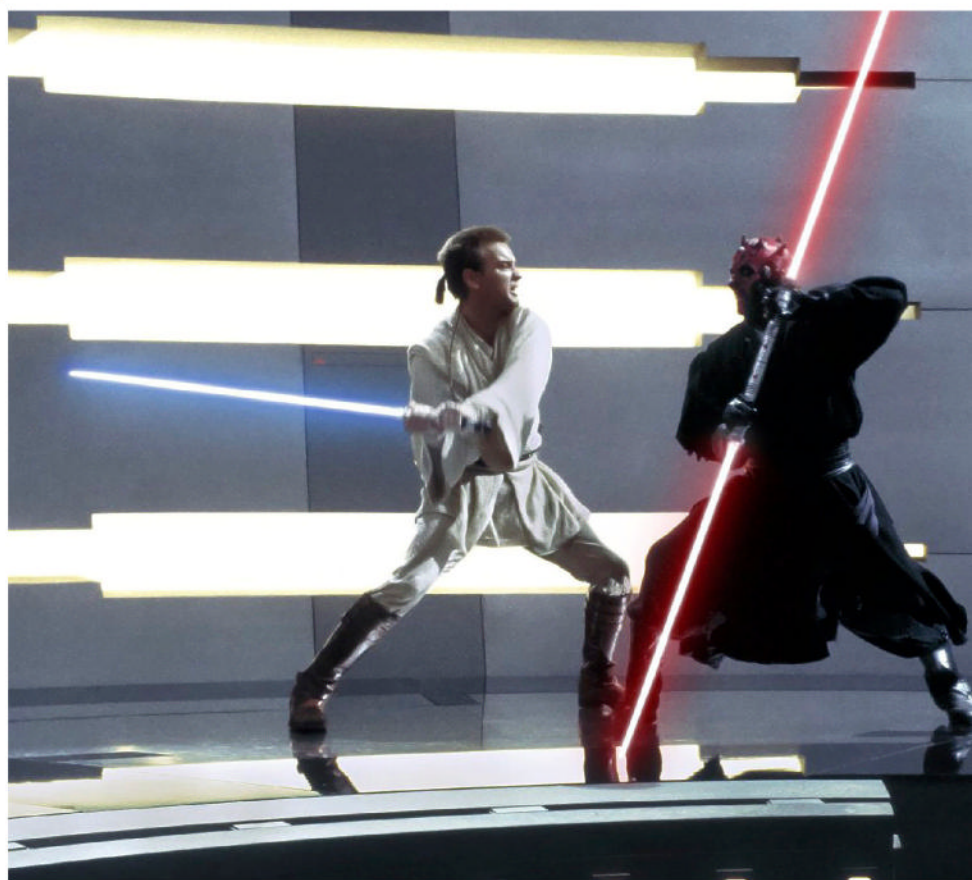
EWAN MCGREGOR LOOKS BACK ON THE JEDI SAGE'S STANDOUT PREQUEL SCENES

WORDS BEN TRAVIS

THE SPIRIT OF Alec Guinness' Obi-Wan Kenobi looms large over the original *Star Wars* trilogy — literally, since he's a Force ghost for most of it. So when Ewan McGregor was cast to play the younger Obi-Wan in the prequels, the pressure was on. "Everybody felt the importance of it," he reflects now, in-between takes on upcoming drama series *A Gentleman In Moscow*. After a quick, "Hello there," we asked him to revisit four of young Kenobi's most memorable moments.

## THE MAUL BRAWL THE PHANTOM MENACE

The 'Duel Of The Fates' sequence has gone down in *Star Wars* legend — Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson) and his apprentice Obi-Wan Kenobi facing off against Darth Maul (Ray Park) and his double-bladed lightsaber. After Qui-Gon is taken out by Maul, it all comes down to Obi-Wan. "With Ray it's like playing tennis," recalls McGregor of the fight. "A poor tennis player versus a good tennis player! He's an athlete and a martial artist. He upped my game. Because we were both super-young, and he was so good, it went on fire — the nature of one-against-one meant that we could really, really go for it." They were, if anything, a little *too* enthusiastic. "We shot on film, and they over-cranked the camera slightly to slow us down, because we were going so fast. They were worried that people would think we'd been sped up." After vanquishing Maul, Obi-Wan cradles the dying Qui-Gon in his arms — a pivotal point in the prequels. "There are moments in any script that become like little pinnacles, that there's an expectation that you hit emotionally. And that was one of them," says McGregor. "I was so fond of Liam. He's such a generous and wonderful man — playing it was super-easy, because he was right in the moment with me, and I was in there with him."

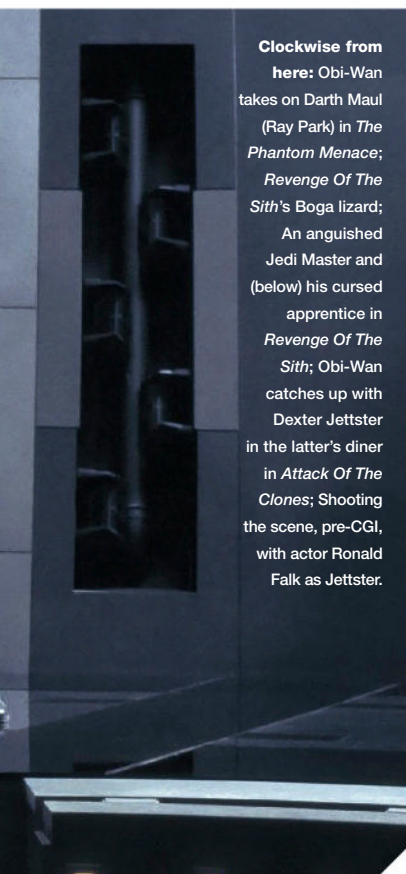


## DEX'S DINER ATTACK OF THE CLONES

Following the trail of a failed assassination attempt on Padmé (Natalie Portman), Obi-Wan seeks answers from Dexter Jettster in a '50s-style diner on Coruscant. "It was like a scene from a different genre," McGregor says — a slice of *American Graffiti* in space. For the actor, the retro red booths and neon signs were a welcome reprieve from the prevalent blue screen that became an increasing part of the prequels' production. "That was a physical set to be in, with actors in creature suits, and armies of people keeping them cool. There's always about three or four people traipsing after them with fans, and tubes going in funny places to blow cold air into their suits so they don't overheat." The Ernest Borgnine-inspired Dex was played on set by Ronald Falk (pictured left; Falk once admitted he was "kind of bewildered" by the scene), and he later provided the voice for the four-armed CG Besalisk too. "I got to act with somebody. It was a real actor," notes McGregor, a rare occurrence amid all the digital work. "I wasn't just acting to a tennis ball."







**Clockwise from here:** Obi-Wan takes on Darth Maul (Ray Park) in *The Phantom Menace*; *Revenge Of The Sith*'s Boga lizard; An anguished Jedi Master and (below) his cursed apprentice in *Revenge Of The Sith*; Obi-Wan catches up with Dexter Jettster in the latter's diner in *Attack Of The Clones*; Shooting the scene, pre-CGI, with actor Ronald Falk as Jettster.



## LIZARD ON THE LOOSE REVENGE OF THE SITH

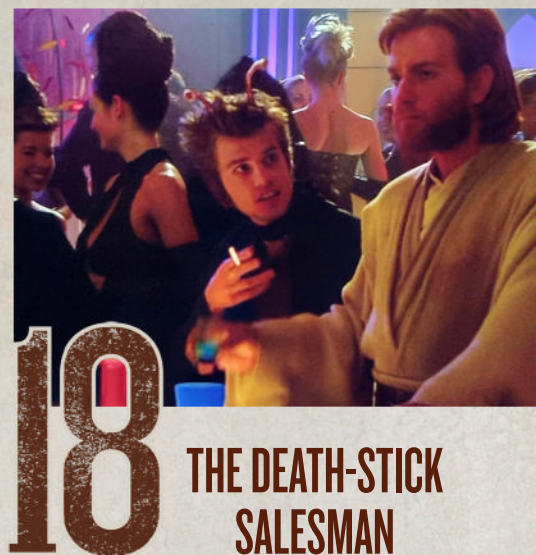
On the surface of Utapau, Obi-Wan enters a deadly chase after Separatist cyborg General Grievous (Matthew Wood) — the latter on a full-throttle wheel bike, and the Jedi Master straddling a bird-like Boga lizard. It was not an easy ride. “If you imagine sitting on a horse all day, it stretches muscles that don’t otherwise get stretched. This was twice as round as a horse,” laughs McGregor, recalling the giant roving gimbal. “It wasn’t fun!” At the time, he had little idea of what the Boga looked like. “The most they had to show us was just a drawing. You’d ask, ‘What’s this going to look like?’ And everyone would roll their eyes, like, ‘Oh God, the actor wants to know where he is and what he’s doing.’ Someone would scuttle off and get a picture, and they’d go, ‘This is it.’ And you’d go, ‘Oh... [unsure] okay!’” On screen,

though, it looked better than McGregor could have imagined. “Seeing it now, it’s like, ‘Woah! Yeah, that’s pretty cool.’ It’s impressive, but it was a surprise. It was almost like watching a film that you were in that you didn’t make. Because so much of it wasn’t there.”



## THE HIGH GROUND REVENGE OF THE SITH

It all comes down to this — Obi-Wan takes down Anakin Skywalker (Hayden Christensen), who’s been drawn to the dark side by Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid). Their final showdown on the sizzling lava fields of Mustafar is potent with heartbreak and confusion, a tragic end to the Master-apprentice partnership. That emotion came naturally. “I didn’t walk on set with that in mind,” notes McGregor. “It sort of happened of its own accord. And that’s because I love working with Hayden.” It was the end of Anakin and Obi-Wan; the end of the prequels; the end of an era. “It was bringing that part of my life to a close. I wasn’t assuming that I would make another one. Oftentimes as an actor, if you’re lucky, you allow things to happen in the moment that you didn’t maybe anticipate.” Those feelings arose again years later when McGregor and Christensen reunited on the *Obi-Wan* series. “When we did the dialogue after our final fight in that [show], that became very emotional. And I hadn’t anticipated that either.” Brotherhood never truly dies.



## THE DEATH-STICK SALESMAN

### ALL HAIL ELAN SLEAZEBAGGANO

“EVERYONE KNOWS THE ‘Death Sticks Guy,’” beams Matt Doran. “It’s such a short scene, but it’s amazing just how many people reacted to that one little tiny moment.”

For the *Star Wars*-challenged, the ‘Death Sticks Guy’ is actually called Elan Sleazebaggano, the most nominatively determined character in cinema history. Uttering only three lines, the bequipped scallywag tries to peddle thinly veiled cigarettes to Obi-Wan at the Outlander Club. In *Attack Of The Clones*’ funniest moment, Obi-Wan plays a Jedi mind trick, sending Elan scuttling off to “rethink his life”.

Shooting at Fox (now Disney) Studios, Sydney, Doran, best known at that point for playing Mouse in *The Matrix*, remembers, “It actually took longer to get past the security gate than to shoot the scene.” The props team had created Death Sticks for Doran to hold but George Lucas nixed them. What you see in the film is CG (as are Sleazebaggano’s antennae). Doran recalls Lucas “wasn’t the most chatty bloke”, but he had a giggle with McGregor.

“Ewan just seemed like a good lad,” he says. “Someone who you’d want to hang out with and have a few beers and a laugh with. I did get to touch his lightsaber as well.”

Given his position as a fan favourite, surely there is a space for a Sleazebaggano Disney+ spin-off, a kind of *Breaking Bad* in reverse where Elan starts scuzzy and cleans up his act.

“Who knows?” he suggests. “Maybe someone from Disney will read *Empire* and be like, ‘You know what? That’s not a bad idea.’” IAN FREER

**Above:** Elan Sleazebaggano (Matt Doran) — aka the ‘Death Sticks Guy’ — tries to offload dodgy gigs to Obi-Wan in *Attack Of The Clones*. **Right:** Collector’s item: fan favourite Sleazebaggano in action-figure form.







## THE LANDSCAPE

It's fitting that Anakin and Obi-Wan's big bout takes place on a lava planet, given the volcanic emotions at play. And to authentically bring Mustafar to life, the crew went after the real deal. "We had this lucky break — Mount Etna erupted in Italy, so we sent a cameraman out to film it," producer Rick McCallum recalls. "He spent three days there, he got every spurt of lava coming out — some of them hundreds and hundreds of feet high. So almost all the shots of lava exploding are real." The finished sequence makes it look and feel like the duel is happening in the bowels of hell. In reality, it took place across seven different soundstages, with Ewan McGregor and Hayden Christensen fighting, climbing, and swinging from one part of the set to another. "When they climb up the [lava] collector-arm, that was actually there on the set at an angle they had to run up," says stunt coordinator Nick Gillard. "We also swung them both on ropes the whole length of the stage."

## THE COMBAT

Anakin and Obi-Wan trade vicious strikes for ten minutes, going mano-a-mano as they match

19

ICONIC SEQUENCE

# THE MUSTAFAR DUEL

AS MASTER AND APPRENTICE CAME TO BLOWS, THINGS REALLY HEATED UP

WORDS **AMON WARMANN** ADDITIONAL REPORTING **TOM ELLEN**

each other move for move. One pivotal instant sees them both attempt a Force-push at the same time, cancelling each other out. "The entire fight is in that moment," says Gillard. "They're so equally matched, they can't get through, and at that point they're reading each other so closely." McGregor and Christensen mastered the fast and intense choreography for the climactic battle over four months of

training, so much so that no camera tricks were needed in post-production. "Hayden really wanted to beat the shit out of Ewan — as a friend!" says McCallum. "They were competitive. So it was very tense on set. They both got serious scars on their hands; they went through probably 50 to 60 lightsabers each. They hit them so hard, they'd bend and break. We had a lightsaber guy — his

Lucasfilm







sole function was to feed the both of them with new lightsabers.”

## THE EMOTIONS

Anakin becoming a Sith Lord gives the fight an additional emotional — and ferocious — edge. “While he still has his repertoire of moves that he’s learned from Obi, he’s unpredictable,” says Gillard. “And so even though Yoda has effectively told him to go kill him, I don’t think Obi wants to do that. So Obi has to defend, because he also loves him. He’s just trying to absorb it for as long as he can. And hopefully, Anakin will run out of steam.” All those emotions come to the fore as Obi-Wan pleads with his former padawan to come back to the light. Kenobi has been a fairly cool-headed character throughout the three films, and then, suddenly, we see him break down. “This is his best friend, his brother,” reflects McCallum. He’s been the mentor to Anakin and he’s seen him fall. After Order 66, that was it — he had to stop this. He wanted to stop him — but he wanted to stop him with *words* — ‘Come on, Anakin, you can’t do this anymore, you almost killed Padmé.’ You see all this frustration in Obi-Wan.”

## THE HIGH GROUND

It all leads to an unforgettable conclusion, as Anakin, fuelled by pride and anger, gets his limbs severed by Obi-Wan after attempting a reckless move. As Gillard notes, however, that wasn’t initially how the fight was meant to end. “Originally, they both land on the side of the lava flow and immediately start fighting. Anakin disarms Obi and grabs him by the throat. He’s about to chop his head off, but Obi sucks the lightsaber into his hand in a defensive move to try and block it, and in doing so cuts straight through Anakin’s arms and legs. But George is the creator. We would be foolish to second-guess him. And he wanted something else.” Even so, Obi-Wan can’t quite bring himself to finish what he started. “He feels he’s done enough damage,” says McCallum. “I also think he doesn’t believe Anakin will recover — he thinks he’s going to die. It’s only because Palpatine comes in and uses everything to save him and create this freak [that he survives].” It’s a rare ending to a *Star Wars* fight: *no-one* is victorious. Although, as McCallum points out, Anakin “exploding in fire is un-fucking-believable”. Cinema was the real winner.



## SHADY SHENANIGANS AND GALACTIC CORRUPTION

AFTER THE DERRING-DO of the original trilogy, *Star Wars* fans didn’t necessarily expect “taxation of trade routes to outlying star systems” to be a major part of the prequels. But when you think about it, it shows commendable ambition. The means by which a republic could fall into fascism was something that clearly fascinated George Lucas, and it’s chilling to see Palpatine undermine democracy from within. Across three films, the fiendishly clever Sith Lord outplays the well-meaning Chancellor Valorum and his allies. Worse, he persuades every good guy to support him at some key moment. Watch the trilogy from his point of view, and this is a triumph of Machiavellian manoeuvring, not a tragedy, and all our favourite heroes are in fact his unwitting patsies. **HELEN O’HARA**



## THANK THE MAKER: IT’S GEORGE LUCAS

AS DIRECTORIAL CAMEOS go, George Lucas’ long-awaited bow in a *Star Wars* movie is perhaps not quite up there with your average Hitchcock appearance or, indeed, his own turn in *Beverly Hills Cop III* as ‘Disappointed Man’. As Anakin Skywalker rushes into the space opera to hear Chancellor Palpatine pontificate about Darth Plagueis The Wise, he passes a bunch of bystanders; two of whom are Baron Notluwiski Papanoida (Lucas) and his daughter, Chi Eekway (played by Lucas’ daughter, Katie). They’re on screen for about seven seconds, and do nothing. Yet this is the beginning of a significant recurring character in the *Star Wars* universe. Well, maybe not that significant, but Baron Papanoida did show up (voiced by Corey Burton) in an episode of *The Clone Wars*. Beat that, Hitchcock. **CHRIS HEWITT**





# 22

## THE COOLEST JEDI IN THE GALAXY

A TIMELINE OF MACE WINDU, THE PURPLE-BLADED GENERAL WHO BROUGHT BADASSERY TO THE FORCE

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

### WINTER 1973

George Lucas sits down to tap away at a script outline. Titled 'Journal Of The Whills', it begins with some soon-to-be-abandoned lore: "This is the story of Mace Windy, a revered Jedi-bendu of Ophuchi, as related to us by C.J. Thorpe,

padawan learner to the famed Jedi." The first *Star Wars* character ever to be named on paper, Mace was put to one side but not forgotten. C.J., on the other hand, was consigned to the dustiest room in the Jedi archives (though she might just have inspired the name of a *West Wing* character).

### SUMMER 1977

*Star Wars* comes out in cinemas. In New York, a 28-year-old theatre actor named Samuel L. Jackson catches a daytime screening. "Yeah, I was high," he recalled to *Empire* in 2018 of the experience. "Everybody in the movie theatre was smoking weed like it was legal. So when they went into hyperspace, it was like, 'WHOOOOOOA!' That ship [in the opening shot] was just gliding across the screen. Going and going and going. I'd never seen anything like that. I never imagined a spaceship being *that* big. It was like, shit, 12 blocks. It was awesome."

### WINTER 1996

Appearing on British talk-show *TFI Friday*, Jackson tells host Chris Evans that "the film I'm

chasing right now is the *Star Wars* prequel. I just want to sit in a room with George Lucas and let him know that, 'Hey, I'd be Lando Calrissian's father.'"

### SPRING 1997

While shooting aquatic sci-fi *Sphere* in Vallejo, California, Jackson gets word that Lucas has heard about the *TFI Friday* appearance and wants to meet him. Jackson hustles to Skywalker Ranch. "We sat, talked and he said, 'I don't know that there's anything for you aside from the captain of the guard.' I was like, 'Look, man, whatever. You know, you can put me in a stormtrooper uniform and I'll run across screen. Nobody even needs to know but me.' He said, 'I'm sure we can find something.'"

### LATE 1997

Jackson is summoned mysteriously to London. "They put me in a room and started fitting me with Jedi robes and boots. I was like, 'Whoa! Really? Okay,'" he remembered in 2018. His excitement is extreme, not least when he is

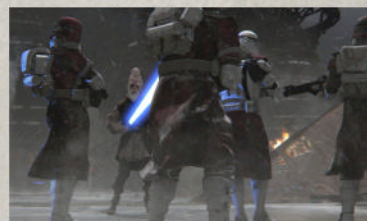


A pocket-sized Palpatine unleashes horror on the Jedi.

# 23

## ORDER 66

PALPATINE'S JEDI WIPEOUT IS HEARTSTOPPING STUFF



### BULLET TIME

First to bite the Jedi dust is Jedi Council member Ki-Adi-Mundi. Adding further fuel to the 'clone troopers can't shoot for shit' debate, they shoot him in the chest, despite him having a head the size of a small truck.



## THE JEDI TEXTS

WE FIRED OFF SOME KEY QUESTIONS TO SAMUEL L. JACKSON FOR THIS ISSUE. HIS BRIEF BUT HIGH-ENERGY REPLIES, IN FULL...

**What are your memories of your outstanding Palpatine fight? 92 MOVES THRU 3 ROOMS BACKWARDS IN BOOTS AND A ROBE!**

**What were your thoughts on Mace's death? HE'S NOT DEAD!!!**

**Do you have any Mace action figures? TONS**

**If Lucasfilm came calling about a Mace Windu solo series for Disney+, what would you want to do in it? EVERYTHING YES!!**



asked to select a lightsaber handle — only tempered by the fact that, as he flicks through the script pages of *The Phantom Menace*, he can't find a single fight scene for his character, Mace Windu. "I started to realise that I wasn't ever going to pull my lightsaber out in this movie. I was just going to be sitting in a Jedi Council room with my arms folded. But I wanted to be in the next one. So I kept bringing George snacks..."

## SUMMER 2000

*The Phantom Menace* has been released, complete with Jackson arm-folding, and grossed \$924 million. On the Australian set of *Attack Of The Clones*, the actor has a crucial moment of small talk with Lucas. "Who do we talk to about the lightsaber colour?" he asks. "Um, well, good guys are green and blue... bad guys are red. That's just the way it works," Lucas answers. Jackson nods, then tries his luck: "No purple lightsaber?" After a beat to consider, Lucas folds: "You might get purple." The snack-deliveries have paid off.

## SUMMER 2005

Mace got to fight in the grand mêlée at the end of *Clones*, but his biggest action moment comes at the end of *Revenge Of The Sith*, battling arch-nasty Palpatine. "I was practising like crazy. I did not want to look awful with my fucking lightsaber," Jackson told *Empire* with a laugh.

He asks Lucas if he could dispatch Palpatine, but this time no amount of wheedling works. "George just wouldn't let me. I'd say, 'I can kill this dude. You know that, right?'" Instead, it is Mace who meets — or appears to meet — his maker.

## DECEMBER 2019

Jackson returns as Windu with a brief voice cameo in *The Rise Of Skywalker*. It is to be his final performance as the character — at least, to date. The star's passion for Mace still burns as bright as that indigo blade, though: Jackson keeps his lightsaber hilt — initialled with BMF, standing for 'Bad Motherfucker' — in a trophy case in his house, and he will forever be proud of how he made a dent in the galaxy far, far away. "What's great about Mace is he sees the big picture. He has total clarity about what's going on in the world. And he's on par with this one character that we all revere, Yoda. If Yoda had a vice-president, that would be me."



**Clockwise from main:** Mace Windu (Samuel L. Jackson) plus purple lightsaber in *Revenge Of The Sith*; With members of the Jedi Council in *Sith*; Building up to an arm-fold in *The Phantom Menace*; With Obi-Wan (Ewan McGregor) in *Attack Of The Clones*; Listening to George Lucas on the *Sith* set.

## TAKING THE FALL

Twi'lek Jedi Aayla Secura is also gunned down in cold blood, on the planet of Felucia (bye, Felucia), falling to the ground in a frankly unconvincing manner, not unlike Larry David pretending to faint.



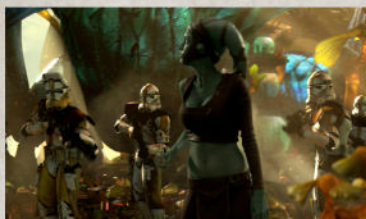
## ON YOUR BIKE

On Saleucami, Stass Allie falls foul of her allies, as two speeder-bike-riding troopers slam on the brakes, let her get ahead, and then kill her. A violation of the Highway Code, yes. But as an execution of Order 66? Perfect.



## FULL BLAST

Another Council mainstay bites the dust, blasted out of the air in his ship on Cato Neimoidia. No airbags, no parachutes, no more Plo Koon.



## START PANICKIN', IT'S ANAKIN

If there were any doubt that Anakin Skywalker wasn't fully committed to his transformation into Darth Vader, it's washed away as Anakin enters the Jedi Temple to murder a bunch of kids. Case closed. **CHRIS HEWITT**





# 24 THE RISE OF PALPATINE

THERE WAS ONLY ONE WAY WE COULD HAVE ENDED OUR PREQUELS CELEBRATION. AS **EMPIRE** IS GRANTED AN AUDIENCE WITH THE EMPEROR, IAN MCDIARMID TALKS ABOUT BEING THE BIGGEST BAD OVER FOUR EVIL DECADES

Ian McDiarmid,  
photographed  
exclusively for  
*Empire* in  
Edinburgh on  
23 January 2024.





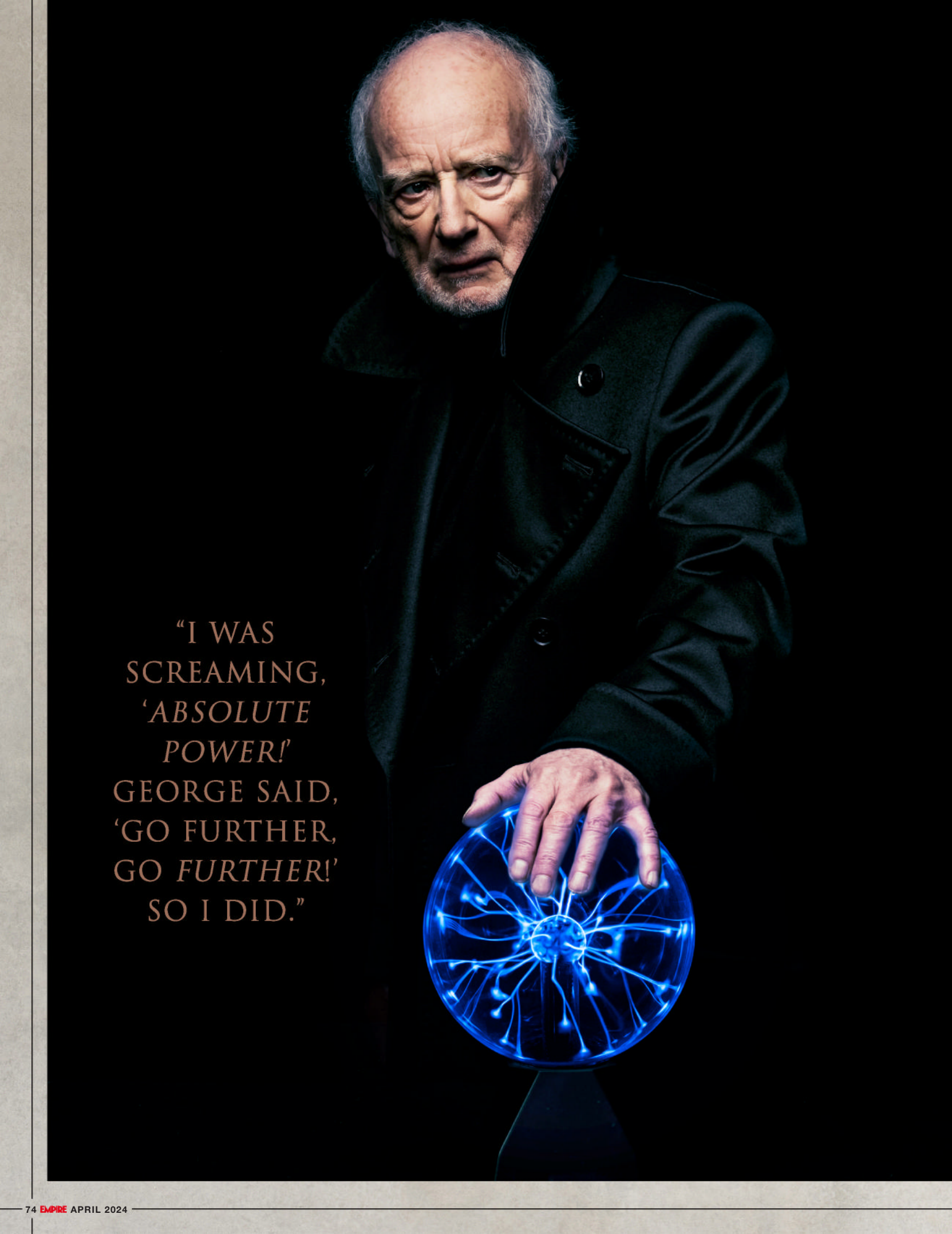
WORDS  
**JAMES DYER**



**STEVE SCHOFIELD**







"I WAS  
SCREAMING,  
'ABSOLUTE  
POWER!'  
GEORGE SAID,  
'GO FURTHER,  
GO *FURTHER!*'  
SO I DID."



SENATOR, SUPREME CHANCELLOR, SITH Lord, Emperor. Whatever title you know him by, *Star Wars*' cowed puppet-master is the undisputed architect of all your pain. Every plot, scheme, and dark-side contrivance, from the opening crawl of *The Phantom Menace* (onerous taxes!) to the grand finale of *The Rise Of Skywalker* (the Sith Eternal!), bears the fingerprints of Sheev Palpatine's insidious machinations.

Of course, none of that was mentioned — or even imagined — when a 37-year-old Scottish stage actor sauntered blithely into a London production office in 1981 for a chat with George Lucas. We'd already met the Emperor in *The Empire Strikes Back*, but that iteration — a holographic chimaera of two different actors — clearly wasn't going to cut it for the extended villainy required for *Return Of The Jedi*. After hearing from a broad array of lauded British thespians, from David Suchet to Ben Kingsley, Lucas landed on Ian McDiarmid, who had recently portrayed an octogenarian curmudgeon in Sam Shepard's play *Seduced* at London theatre The Royal Court. If he could convincingly play a man twice his age, he might also be able to shrug on the withered form of Darth Vader's malignant master.

Since then, McDiarmid has played him ancient, young, old once again, and even freshly back from the grave. Somehow, Palpatine always returns. Though as we discover when McDiarmid chats with *Empire* from atop a swivel stool at his kitchen counter, the congenial Scot is, thankfully, a million parsecs from the gnarled Sith Lord.

.....

**You've played Sheev Palpatine in one guise or another for four decades now. Is he an intrinsic part of you by this point?**

He is. I was surprised how easily I slipped into him in the first place. I think it was just not having much time to do it, because it was all last minute. The moment I saw the make-up, I thought, "Oh, I think I know who this is." The make-up gave me the voice, and the voice gave me the character, and then off we went.

**How did you react when, nearly 20 years later, George asked you to return for the prequels?**

The first thing he said was, "Do you know anyone who wants to play an emperor?" I said, "I think you know the answer to that." And he said, "Well, that was the audition." He then told me about Palpatine, who was, he said, just an ordinary politician. He didn't say like John Major, but that's what he meant. That sort of person. Bland. That's the public persona that George wanted for Palpatine before he grew into



**Top:** McDiarmid becomes evil incarnate in *Revenge Of The Sith*. **Left:** Rehearsing with Samuel L. Jackson as Jedi Mace Windu, as director George Lucas looks on.

the monster. Then he talked about this other character who is manipulating things behind the scenes. I didn't know that I was playing both until I got the script and it was Darth Sidious' script! I couldn't have been more delighted.

**Was it gratifying to be able to go back and fully flesh out the Emperor, who originally was iconic but rather one-note?**

Yes, it was great to be able to do that. It's always great to play parts where somebody's pretending to be other than they are and has a terrible secret behind their apparent innocent motives. George said a great thing to me one day: "You should think of your face, Ian's face, and your eyes, as a mask. As if it had been grafted onto your flesh. Think of your eyes as if they weren't your real eyes, but somehow artificial." That was an enormously helpful thing to say to an actor.

**The prequels famously saw George experiment extensively with CGI — so much so that the set was often just a giant, green box. How did you find that?**

It was easier for me than it was for the guys who had to fight. [In the Senate] I was in a giant pod up a huge ladder. In *Phantom Menace* I was up there with Natalie [Portman], isolated from everybody and very, very high. She was in this headdress and it caused her a bit of trouble. I said, "Should we get someone?" She said, "No, no, the lady who's in charge of my hair has no head for heights!"

**You did get some lightsaber action of your own in *Revenge Of The Sith*, though.**

My stunt-double did most of the work. I had to go through the routine, though. I wasn't very good at it. In one take, I hit poor Sam Jackson. He was very understanding. After that the saber was quite sensibly taken out of my hand and given to an expert.

**That scene is a standout — the moment Chancellor Palpatine truly becomes the Emperor.**

George kept hyping me up on that. I was screaming, "ABSOLUTE POWER!" I said, "Do you want me to do some quiet ones, because this is a bit much?" George said, "No, go further, go further!" So I did, and he seems to have kept most of it — there's no holding back there.

**What's the line that you get asked to repeat most often?**

The one that they like most of all is, "DO IT!" People just love it.

**Let's go back to the start. By the time you joined *Star Wars*, it had already become a phenomenon. Were you aware of quite how big a deal it was when you signed up?**

I suppose I wasn't, really. I saw the first film when it came out, and I thought, "Oh great, these are like the Saturday-morning serials I used



to see when I was a kid, only with colour and more money." But breathe it not aloud: I hadn't seen *Empire Strikes Back*! So I had no acquaintance with the Emperor in his previous incarnation at all.

**Probably for the best, given that it was Marjorie Eaton in the cowl, with a chimpanzee's eyes and Clive Revill's voice.**

Yes, I can't understand why he didn't keep that combination.

**You were the first Sith to get to keep his voice in a *Star Wars* film, though. Was that always a given?**

It didn't even occur to me until about halfway through the shoot when Richard [Marquand, *Return Of The Jedi*'s director] said, "We're going to give you a tape of Clive Revill's voice, and if you can get close to it, George might let you keep it." I went to the [ADR] recording session in a studio in London with George, and he'd invited

Steven Spielberg and Kathy Kennedy, so no pressure. I started and Steven said, "Oh my God, you're so *evil*!" So I thought, "Oh, that's nice, isn't it?" In retrospect, I realised George must have been getting his close friends and colleagues to see whether the voice was going to work. They thought it did and the rest is history.

**It's quite a tall order, to be asked to try and sound more sinister than James Earl Jones.**

Well, he was one of the best voices in the world! But of course I never talked to him because he was added later. Although I did meet him when I was doing a play in America. He very amusingly got down on one knee and said, "My Emperor." He was a delightful man.

**All of your scenes were of course with David Prowse, who it's fair to say sounds quite dissimilar.**

Even if he'd been the right voice for the part, which he certainly wasn't, I wouldn't have been

"EVERY SINGLE EVIL ACT IN ALL OF THE STAR WARS FRANCHISE IS DOWN TO THAT CHARACTER."

**Right, top to bottom: (2002)**

Supreme Chancellor Palpatine meets up with Anakin Skywalker (Hayden Christensen) in *Attack Of The Clones*; Negotiating with Mas Amedda (David Bowers) in *Clones*; *Revenge Of The Sith* sees the scheming Palpatine lure Anakin to the dark side.



able to hear him anyway, because he was very tall and in that helmet. So, I usually had to guess when he'd finished. It was a very odd experience. I just imagined what he'd said, timed it, and then came in with my response. That's why when we got to the scenes with Luke, it was a big relief, because that was finally actor to actor.

**Your very first day in the role was that iconic shot in the Death Star hangar when you walk out of the shuttle. What was that like?**

Well, I was practically blind because of the contact lenses. So, I was in the hood and led up some steps. Dave Tomblin, the first AD, said, "There'll be a lot of smoke, go down those steps, Dave's at the bottom and just say the lines." Well, once the smoke hit, I couldn't see a thing and there were a lot of steps to go down. I had to concentrate on not falling over the cloak while also keeping my head up to seem imperial. Somehow I got to the bottom and there was my good friend Michael Pennington [Moff Jerjerrod], on his knees. I said to him, "Oh, life doesn't get better than this, Michael."

**And then you got to do it all over again in *The Rise Of Skywalker*.**

We managed to keep the Emperor's comeback a secret for about a year. I knew six months in advance of shooting that I was going to do it. And of course, these were the last scenes to be shot for obvious reasons, so the word couldn't get out. J.J. said, "Okay, we're going to half admit it at Celebration when we show the trailer." The whole place went nuts! And half the cast went





Coat: Edward Sexton; Polo neck jumper: Uniqlo. Styling: Grace Gilleather. Grooming: Lauren Gollan using Lancôme. Additional imagery: Alamy, Lucasfilm

nuts too, because they didn't know I was in it. Anthony Daniels said, "Great God, it's you! We knew there was someone evil coming up, but we didn't know *you* were coming back."

**"Somehow Palpatine returned" became one of the most memed lines on the internet.**

A lot of people said it was ridiculous. Of course, he was dead at the end of *Return Of The Jedi*! And frankly, I think George thought he'd killed me too. But J.J. thought it would be a good idea — I wasn't going to argue with him. But also, I felt that Palpatine always had a plan B — probably a plan C, D, E and F as well. And he was already an expert in cloning, so...

**I think the most shocking revelation in *The Rise Of Skywalker* was that Palpatine has a granddaughter. Which is definitive proof that the Emperor...**

I know. Please don't pursue that line too vigorously. But yes, he does. It's a horrible idea to think of Palpatine having sex in any shape or form. But then, of course, perhaps he didn't. Maybe it's all to do with midi-chlorians — and don't ask me what those are. Never trust your granddaughter. That's the T-shirt Palpatine got made. Shortly after his death.

**Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of Palpatine is that his rise is so mundane; the politics of it are so grounded and believable.**

Oh yes. You can see how people, not just Palpatine, arrange things in their best interests for absolute power. That's very carefully threaded through

all of the films. Jar Jar undid it all, really. He was on Palpatine's side, even though he didn't know he was. A perfect creature for manipulation. I think Jar Jar would have had more to do in the Senate, but because he'd been less popular as a character, to put it mildly, he was sidelined in the second film. Which is a pity. My favourite line in that whole build-up towards me taking control of the universe was, "I love democracy!"

**George presumably had Nixon in mind first and foremost. There's a lot of Vietnam in *Return Of The Jedi*, and your throne-room was even oval-shaped.**

That's right, yes. He did say, "Remind you of anybody?" while I was sitting in that throne. But he was always elusive. Somebody asked me if I was George W. Bush at one point, when the invasion of Iraq was going on. George said, "Oh, I think there's someone a bit more powerful than George Bush." I said, "Well, who's that?" He said, "He owns a lot of newspapers..."

**Looking back on it all now, having played the role for 40 years, what do you think Palpatine's legacy is?**

Well, the thing that I'm most pleased about, and you know, this only came to a head when they asked me to come back for *The Rise Of Skywalker*, is that every single evil act in all of the *Star Wars* franchise is either directly or indirectly down to that character. That is total evil, and that's strangely satisfying as an arc. I do feel fortunate to have been able to do it — and other villains of cinema now have to compete with that.

# 25

## ATTACK OF THE MEMES

THE PREQUELS AND THE INTERNET WERE MADE FOR EACH OTHER



THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY RE-RELEASE OF *STAR WARS: EPISODE I — THE PHANTOM MENACE* IS IN CINEMAS FOR A LIMITED TIME FROM 3 MAY





A hand with a ring on the ring finger is reaching upwards towards a series of blue stage lights that create a tunnel-like effect. The background is dark, and the lights are arranged in a vertical line, creating a sense of depth and focus on the hand.

# CHASING AMY

Living her life in the glare  
of the spotlight, almost  
everything Amy Winehouse  
did was documented and  
scrutinised. Sam Taylor-  
Johnson's new biopic

*BACK TO BLACK,*

though, looks for the real  
woman underneath it all

WORDS  
CATHERINE BRAY









## “I told you I was trouble,”

sang Amy Winehouse. Which was a bit of an understatement. Throughout her devastatingly short career, she tore through the world, always without compromise, always on her own terms. With her new film, Sam Taylor-Johnson wanted to pay tribute to that spirit. “What we didn’t want to do was a traditional biopic, which *Back To Black* is definitely not,” says the director.

Winehouse was hardly a traditional 2000s pop star, and was famously frustrated by lazy attempts to bracket her work alongside the likes of other turn-of-the-millennium female singers like Katie Melua or Dido. And rightly so — Winehouse was the real deal, writing raw poetry which she sang with a remarkable contralto voice that seemed to belong to someone not only older than she was, but a timeless talent who could go toe-to-toe with any of the greats. She was just 20 when she released debut album *Frank*, which would be nominated for the Mercury Prize, with debut single ‘Stronger Than Me’ winning an Ivor Novello award. At 24, she won five Grammys for her follow-up masterpiece album *Back To Black*, but a little over three years later, she died.

The much-chronicled nature of her life and success, particularly in Asif Kapadia’s 2015 documentary *Amy* and the relative recency of her tragic death from alcohol poisoning, have prompted hot takes suggesting that Taylor-Johnson’s biopic would be both too soon and surplus to requirements. What could we possibly learn? How could Winehouse’s story be approached in a way that honoured her? These were questions that, inevitably, the filmmakers wrestled with, as they attempted to honour the soul of a rock-and-roll livewire.

**W**HEN TAYLOR-JOHNSON was first approached about a planned Amy biopic, she knew that if she took it on, she’d make it personal. She was a fan of Winehouse in the early days. “I was at [London jazz club] Ronnie Scott’s, and it was a new talent night,” she remembers of her first encounter. “She was just singing, without looking up and engaging, and she just looked so pure. It was an expression of a pure soul.” She felt a connection, too, with Winehouse’s world

in Camden, having worked as the girl at the door at the Camden Palace and frequented the same bars and pubs.

Producer Alison Owen asked the director what her wish-list for the film might look like. At the very top of that list was reuniting with screenwriter Matt Greenhalgh, who wrote *Nowhere Boy*, Johnson’s 2009 exploration of the early years of John Lennon. Greenhalgh was excited, but also terrified by the prospect. “I was like, ‘Oh my God, where do you start? Is this the Holy Grail or a poisoned chalice?’” he recalls.

For two weeks, the pair thrashed out all the possible ways they might make a movie, before deciding to come at it from Winehouse’s point of view. “We’ve all seen the documentary,” says Taylor-Johnson. “We’ve all lived — by proxy, through the media — her life. We thought, ‘Let’s try and create something where we are in her perspective, we’re in her world, we’re in her music and her lyrics, and we’re letting her words and her music guide us through her story.’” This, says Greenhalgh, dictated the tone and approach. “We thought there was no point in trying to heap any more blame on anyone, because people are still hurting now. We just wanted it to be as celebratory as possible.”

Next, they had to find someone with the chops to embody Winehouse’s unique blend of charisma, fearlessness and vulnerability. Taylor-Johnson sat down with lots of young actors, many of whom

showed up as you might expect: dressed to the nines in distinctive Winehouse garb, with huge dark hair and cat-eye make-up. But one of them came in as herself — no make-up, no back-combed beehive, no fake tattoos or other Winehouse cosplay. Marisa Abela’s stand-out credit to date was BBC/HBO hit *Industry*, as Yasmin, a privileged young would-be financier who couldn’t have less in common with the down-to-earth daughter of a cab driver catapulted to unimaginable levels of fame and fortune.

“Marisa was unassuming and charming,” Taylor-Johnson recalls. “But in no way did I feel like, ‘This is Amy.’ She was about to read from the pages that we’d given out, and she just said, ‘Oh, can I have a minute?’ And she looked down, and she looked up and into the lens. And it was her, literally in that moment. I just thought, ‘That’s Amy Winehouse. That’s her. That’s it.’ And she hadn’t even spoken. She just literally transitioned from this sweet, unassuming, charming girl into, boom, Amy Winehouse.”

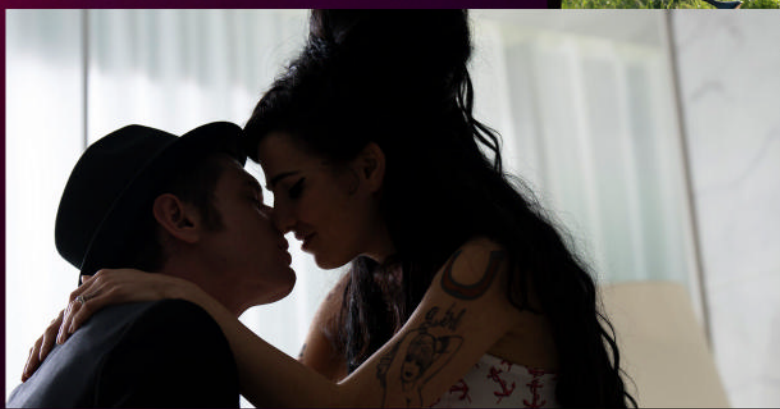
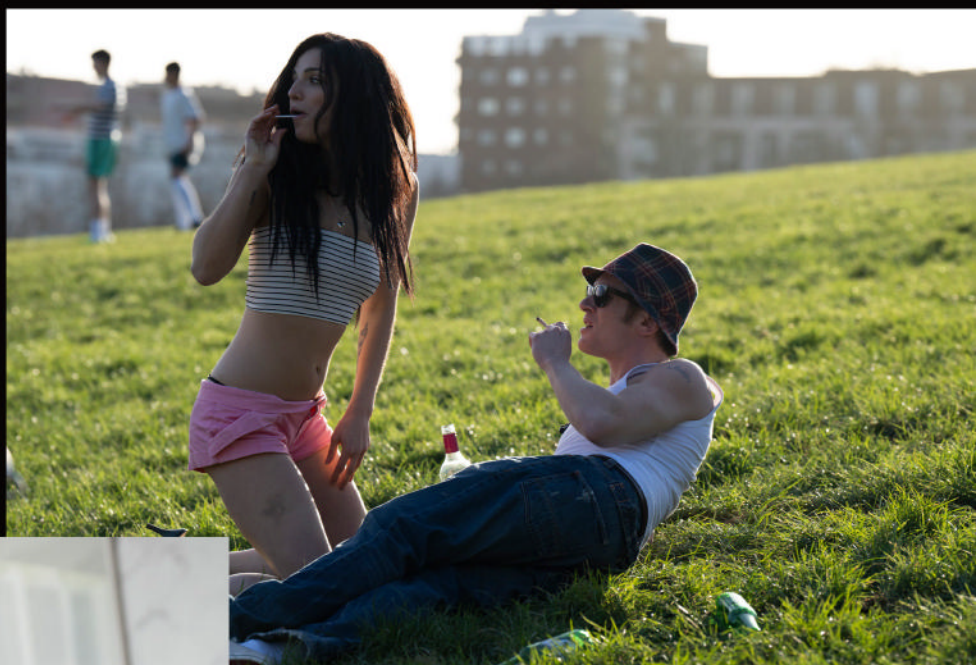
Abela remembers the audition as nerve-racking, but knew that it couldn’t be about trying to dazzle the director into casting her. “It’s not about if I could do my eyeliner a certain way,” she says. “It couldn’t be impersonation. There had to be an attempt at an embodiment of someone’s soul, and what makes them who they are. And I don’t think that Amy’s hair or make-up at any stage in her life was what





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MARISA ABELA



**Clockwise  
from main:**  
Singer/  
songwriter Amy  
Winehouse  
(Marisa Abela)  
in the spotlight;  
Amy hangs out  
with her great  
love Blake  
Felder-Civil  
(Jack  
O'Connell);  
An intimate  
moment for the  
couple; Blake  
watches from  
afar; Writer Matt  
Greenhalgh and  
director Sam  
Taylor-Johnson  
hang out in  
a pie-and-  
mash shop.



made her who she was. It feels better to go in with nothing, with no façade, and try and convince the people in front of you that you understand who this person was in her soul."

It's an unusually mature approach that belies Abela's actual age — she's just turned 27, coincidentally the age Winehouse was when she passed away. Abela heard that news when she was at school. "It was a big shock," she remembers. "She had felt immortal because of her talent. It didn't feel real. And I think a lot of people still feel that way. You know, when you listen to her music now, it's a perspective that is so very much alive."

The film uses Winehouse's songs extensively, and while Abela steers clear of a *Stars In Their Eyes*-style impersonation, the many scenes of Winehouse performing give the actor space to try to embody the singer's indelible work. The music was also a keystone for Taylor-Johnson, to the point that her husband, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, wondered if she was okay. "Every song is just playing on repeat in my head for two years, non-stop all day, every day, in my dreams and every waking moment," the director says. "The other day, I just lost it for a minute. And then I started singing one of her songs and I was just like, 'Stop. Really, just shut up.' Aaron was like, 'I think you need a break.' But it's two years of living with somebody, somebody who's not physically there. For every single waking moment."

**L**OCATION WAS ALSO key to the film's sense of immersion. Camden, and the, well, Camdenness of Camden has always been a huge part of the singer's legend. Pubs like The Good Mixer and The Dublin Castle were Winehouse hang-outs long after she became famous. It was part of her appeal to fans that while other celebrities from down-to-earth backgrounds might disappear up their own bums and into a Chelsea nightclub, she could still be found in her pre-fame haunts.

Taylor-Johnson was delighted to find that "The Dublin Castle is exactly as it was 20 years ago; it hasn't changed at all. Peggy the landlady knew Amy well and is still there running it." In order to shoot scenes there featuring







**Above:** Amy with her mother Janis Winehouse (Juliet Cowan) in happier times. **Left:** Eddie Marsan, who plays Amy's father Mitch, and Taylor-Johnson smile between takes. **Right:** Amy at home on stage while Blake looks on.



Winehouse before she became internationally famous, the crew had to take down all of the celebratory pictures of her that now adorn the pub walls. Even the regulars remained in place, with several background artists selected from the authentic clientele of the pub. It couldn't have been more of a contrast for production designer Sarah Greenwood, who had come fresh from her last job on *Barbie*. Taylor-Johnson laughs, savouring the schism: "I think she enjoyed coming out of one very high-octane world and coming into the Camden wilds."

The Camden wilds, and specifically The Dublin Castle, provide the location for the meet-cute between future husband Blake Fielder-Civil (Jack O'Connell) and Winehouse. It's easy to imagine a version of a Winehouse biopic where that moment plays with huge foreboding, given Fielder-Civil's notoriety. As the man who introduced her to heroin, and with a long history of arrests to his name, including a successful prosecution during his marriage to Winehouse for his part in an assault and cover-up, it wouldn't be difficult for a filmmaker to crucify him. But Taylor-Johnson and Greenhalgh chose a slightly different path.

"He was a villain, obviously, in many ways, but he wasn't the pantomime villain that everyone's made out. There were more sides to his character," says Greenhalgh. "It would have been easy to vilify him, but she really did love him. I think he always felt very insecure in that relationship and constantly expected her to be with some kind of famous musician. And she wasn't, she was with Blake, who was basically a video-production assistant."

Taylor-Johnson wanted the Blake/Amy story to play out with sensitivity to the fact that Winehouse adored him. "She was so absolutely, desperately in love with him, and we have to see what that looks like. We have to see through her eyes what that love can be, because any other way, I'm bringing in my judgement too much.

This is the man her album *Back To Black* is pretty much centred around."

Indeed, as Fielder-Civil, O'Connell doesn't dodge the seedy aspects of his persona, but allows you to see what the appeal could have been, so that there is space to understand her attraction, even if we don't share it. As Taylor-Johnson puts it, "You have to create a world with them falling in love, to allow that love to feel real enough for an entire album to be made around that love. But equally in the back of your mind, you're like, 'I know where this ship goes.'"

Abela is a huge fan of O'Connell, and says this was essential to delivering a successful chemistry read opposite him. "I relaxed and released into my feeling of, 'I'm going to let Jack guide me through this by just being mesmerised by him,'" she says. She didn't meet up with the real Fielder-Civil (although O'Connell sat down with him to get a sense of his vibe), basing her sense of the relationship on the strong emotions on the *Back To Black* album.

When it came to Winehouse's parents, their opinions are heavily documented in their own books and documentaries about their daughter. Kapadia's film, meanwhile, was instrumental in forming public opinion of her father Mitch, who felt he was unfairly characterised as caring more about his daughter's fame and financial success than her health and wellbeing. More recently, a distasteful proposed tour featuring a hologram version of Winehouse performing was endorsed

by the family, to widespread outcry, including from Fielder-Civil, around the issues of consent with such technology (the tour has since been put on hold).

As screenwriter, Greenhalgh felt that a meeting with Mitch wasn't necessary. "If I wanted Mitch's opinion, it was all pretty much laid out in [his] book," he says. "It's the same with [mother] Janis. I don't think I could have got anything more by meeting." Taylor-Johnson went to see them, though. "It was important to meet with them out of respect," she reasons. "But they have no involvement in terms of... like, they couldn't change things. They couldn't dictate how I was to shoot. Otherwise, I wouldn't have done it."

Eddie Marsan plays Mitch, and Taylor-Johnson says his approach was grounded in who Mitch was to Amy: "It's really important to understand that this is a person that people have a lot of judgement and thoughts and feelings around. But Eddie came at it like, 'I'm not playing a villain. I'm not playing a hated person. I'm playing her dad. And she loved her dad.' He took it on that path where, yeah, there were millions of mistakes along the way. But he's still just her dad."

With the film now done and dusted, have the filmmakers heard anything from the ever-outspoken Mitch? Taylor-Johnson says not. "I know he saw the film. I wasn't there. I haven't spoken to him. I think he keeps his feelings





**"YOU HAVE TO CREATE  
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SAM TAYLOR-JOHNSON

pretty much to himself. The important thing for me was not to have any of that noise in my sphere while making the film. And I didn't need the family's approval. All the music rights were already approved by Universal and Sony. So what I wanted as much as possible was the truth of Amy, and Amy's relationship was that she loved her dad, whether we think he did right or wrong."

It's particularly unusual that so many people have at least one take on the matter rattling around their head for all eternity. As Winehouse sang: "I ain't got the time, and if my daddy thinks I'm fine... They tried to make me go to rehab, but I won't go, go, go."

**O**N THE MONSTROUSLY complex question of addiction and rehabilitation, Greenhalgh argues that there is a balance to be struck between exclusively holding other parties responsible — thereby removing Winehouse's agency altogether — and a stance that heaps blame on the victim herself.

"Amy didn't do anything she didn't want to do," he says. "If she didn't want to go with [Fielder-Civil], she wouldn't have been with him. But she did. I think instead of accepting that, he did the one thing he was famous for, which was taking drugs. I think once Amy became impressed with that, which didn't take that long, I think that's the way he controlled her. But this is obviously a perception of mine."

**Above, top to bottom:** Amy enjoys time with her beloved grandmother Cynthia (Lesley Manville); Abela shares a laugh with Taylor-Johnson on set; Amy gets some comfort from dad Mitch.



Not to give the impression that the film is unrelentingly dark. For the greater part of the run-time it looks and behaves like a love story. This necessitated imagining what that might have looked like behind closed doors. For Taylor-Johnson, "It was important to try and think, if this film is through her perspective, to look at the quieter moments. At the moments where she is by herself, or alone with Blake, or alone with her grandma. Obviously, we're not privy to those moments."

Throughout our interview, this theme keeps cropping up: the notion of how to represent someone in moments when we don't have a direct source for how to do that. "It's a creative film," offers Greenhalgh. "I know a lot of people still can't understand that, still can't get their head around it. It's my take on Amy's life and then it's Sam's take on Amy's life. And then it's Marisa and Jack's take on Amy and Blake. In the end, it's all subjective, but you hope that opinion is accepted and embraced by your audience."

This touches on a wider shift in how biopics are understood and talked about, in an era in film culture when greater attention is paid to the idea of people telling their own stories and representing themselves. This often works wonderfully, but also leaves us with gaps if the story you want to tell is of a person who can't do that for themselves. "It's an easy criticism when you're doing a true-life story, 'Oh, you didn't get that right,'" Greenhalgh acknowledges. "But like Ridley Scott said when he got criticism about *Napoleon*, 'Well, were you there? No? Well, fuck off.'" He laughs. "I'm gonna go in with a Ridley Scott head on in future interviews."

It seems Amy Winehouse's zero-fucks attitude has very much left its mark. 🍷

BACK TO BLACK IS IN CINEMAS FROM 12 APRIL

# COUNTING AMY

WINEHOUSE'S CAREER  
(AND HAIR) IN NUMBERS...



## 250

The amount in pounds she was paid a week against future earnings when she signed to Simon Fuller's 19 Management, aged 19.

## 6.5

The height of her beehive in inches.

## 251

Weeks spent in the UK album chart top 40.

## 18.9

The number in thousands of Spotify playlists dedicated to her work.



## 11

Tattoos on her body. She got her first, Betty Boop, aged 15.



## 2

Highest UK singles chart position — as a featured artist on Mark Ronson's 'Valerie'.

## 159

Films and TV shows credited on IMDb.com that feature Amy's songs, including *Waves*, *Ocean's Eight*, *About Time* and *Nativity 2: Danger In The Manger*.

## 1.75

The height in metres of the bronze statue of Amy located at Stables Market in Camden Town, North London.





# MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE

AFTER REDEFINING ON-SCREEN FANTASY WITH

*GAME OF THRONES*, CAN SHOWRUNNERS DAVID

BENIOFF AND D.B. WEISS PULL OFF THE SAME

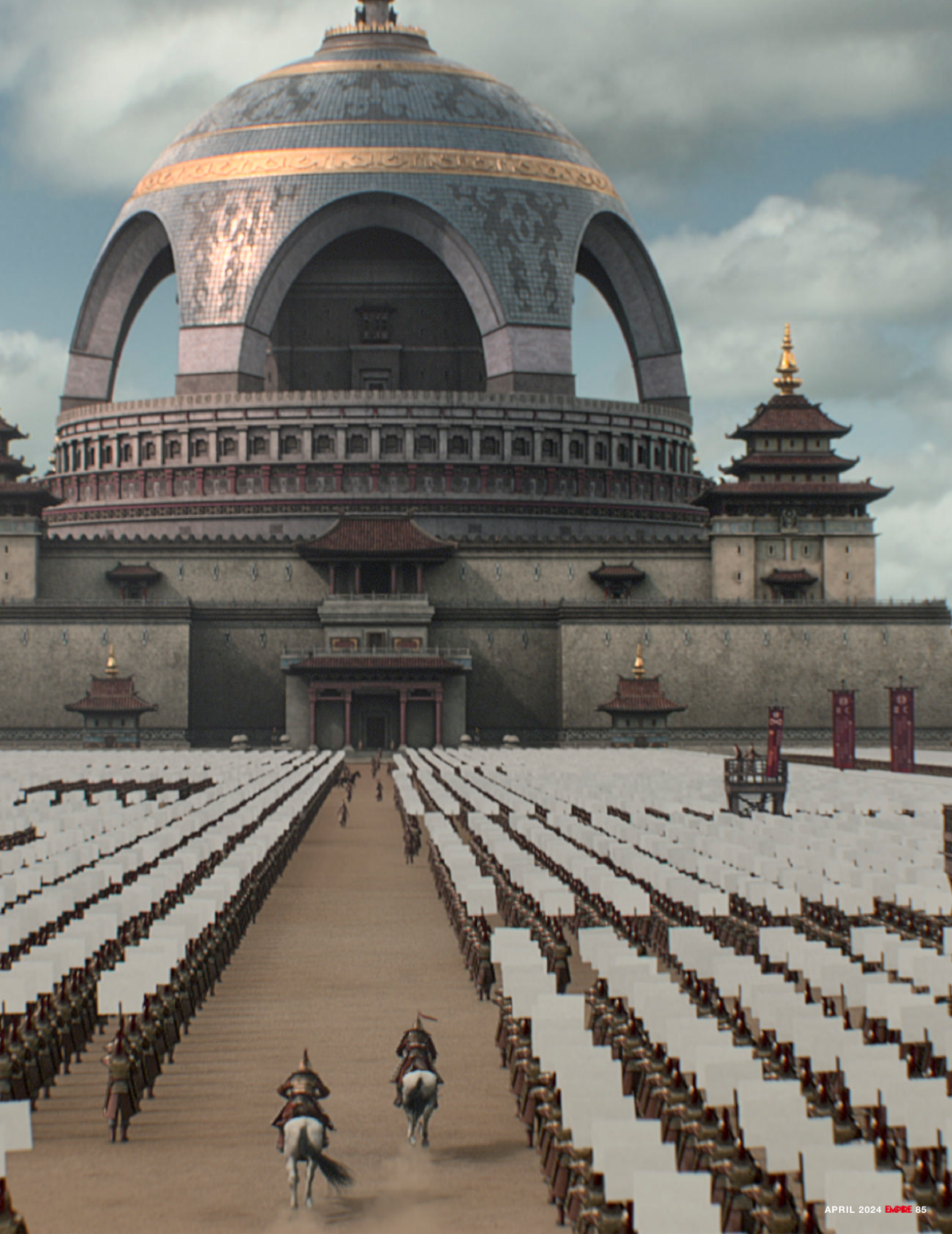
TRICK WITH HARD SCIENCE-FICTION SAGA

**3 BODY PROBLEM?**



WORDS  
**HELEN O'HARA**







# THE SHOWRUNNERS WERE SCARED.

But that's just how they liked it. Fear is exactly why David Benioff and D.B. Weiss picked *The Three-Body Problem* — title reconfigured for the screen as *3 Body Problem* — as their follow-up to *Game Of Thrones*. Cixin Liu's trilogy of novels is hard sci-fi, heavy on the theoretical physics but seriously lacking in sexy green aliens or lasers that go *pew-pew*. It starts during China's Cultural Revolution and finishes at the end of the universe, with flashbacks to ancient history through a virtual-reality game. The alien threats are often invisible, though later books pose the challenge of depicting artefacts that exist in five, or six, or ten dimensions, rather than our native four. Even the title refers to a problem with no solution. Stanley Kubrick would have loved it.

The two showrunners didn't initially know how to describe it, let alone shoot it, which brought on some déjà vu. At first they couldn't sum up George R.R. Martin's bloody, Machiavellian fantasy to agents or peers either. Now the same sense of trepidation, the total lack of any roadmap for their adaptation, felt perversely comforting. They knew they didn't want to do another high fantasy, but another "big genre", as Benioff calls it, would be right on track.

"If someone had said to me before reading these books, 'Do you want to do an alien-invasion story?', there would have been no interest whatsoever," Benioff told *Empire*, on set in July 2022. "But these books came at it in such a different way. That's the appeal and the intimidation factor; they're linked for us. 'How do you encompass all of this in a show?' We didn't know and I'm not sure we know yet. But it's made it such a fun challenge."

Back when they started, they didn't know *Game Of Thrones* would become a global phenomenon, winning 59 Emmys and being broadcast in 173 countries. The question now

is whether this sci-fi effort can break through in the same way. It's an alien-invasion story, yes, but an invasion that almost no-one notices. In the present day of the show, only a series of strange deaths among the top ranks of theoretical physicists alert the authorities that something has gone wrong. Are these really the suicides they appear? Is something else at work?

The deaths appear to be linked to an incredibly immersive, invitation-only VR game that reimagines Earth's history in strange, apocalyptic ways. As the next generation of physicists step into their elder colleagues' shoes, they find themselves targeted in strange, uneven ways — and meanwhile, flashbacks show us the experience of one young woman (yet another physicist) forced into hard labour in 1960s China. How is that connected? And what's going on? It's a mystery show, but also a thriller, a civil war story and the quietest alien-invasion tale since the pod people. The showrunners are not wrong: it *is* hard to describe.

"The feeling that it may be too much was familiar for us," says Weiss. "It was what we felt with *Thrones*, in conjunction with a tremendous amount of excitement over the possibilities of where it could go if we could get it off the ground. It was the terror of the magnitude of what was in front of us. If you're not afraid, you're doing something wrong."

NETFLIX GOT EXCITED FOR BENIOFF AND Weiss to adapt the bestselling books; the streamer had acquired the rights and set the







**Clockwise from left:** Room with quite a view: Supercomputer Sophon (Sea Shimooka) with Jack (John Bradley) and Jin (Jess Hong); A reflective Wade (Game Of Thrones veteran Liam Cunningham); Auggie's (Eiza González) round; Benedict Wong as Da Shi; Jin keeps the doctor away.



production in motion. Over a Zoom call, author Cixin Liu (a *Thrones* fan) gave them his blessing to, as Benioff puts it, “go forth and adapt” — particularly noting that he had, in retrospect, included fewer female characters than a Western TV adaptation would want. The pair also chose a third body to tackle this three-body problem, *True Blood* and *The Terror*’s Alexander Woo, a HBO contemporary who immediately clicked with the duo.

Their first crucial job was to hone in on the characters who would drive the drama. While there are a few memorable protagonists in the books, many come and go or never meet. That won’t work for a TV show where, as Woo says, “The character is the thing. That carries you from one season to the next.”

The trio therefore focused on developing people who could ground the story through its wilder turns. That interwoven core group are nicknamed the ‘Oxford Five’, extraordinarily gifted friends who bonded as students and who are brought back together by the death of their former professor. Why Oxford? The books are mainly set in China (when they’re on Earth at all) and feature a largely Chinese cast. But the showrunners aimed for something different.

It made sense — with Liu’s blessing — to set an English-language adaptation in an English-speaking country, one where international brainiacs might meet and subsequently gather to face a global threat. So where might seem plausible? Says Weiss, “There are some American options but on film, Christchurch College [Oxford] looks a whole lot better than anything we’ve got, no

offence to us as a nation.”

Then all they had to do was form their multi-national gang. *Living’s* Alex Sharp is Will Downing, who has given up the physics theory for a modest life as a teacher. John ‘Samwell Tarly’ Bradley’s character Jack Rooney went another way, building a snack-food empire, though that could soon be dwarfed by Auggie Salazar (Eiza González), whose company is about to go public with a revolutionary new product. Saul Durand, played by *Babylon’s* Jovan Adepo, was closest to their late teacher and is unsure if he wants to get serious about his work or about his partying. Finally, Jess Hong’s Jin Cheng is the empathetic social cement of the group. She brings a sixth hanger-on, her boyfriend Raj Varma (Saamer Usmani), an ambitious naval officer who’s somewhat at a loss among these scientists but gamely joins in. As their group chat puts it, “The Oxford Five Plus Raj” will stand at the centre of everything that follows.

They’re all more-or-less new, even for fans of the books. Bradley’s character was written specifically for him, based on his “funny and caustic” side that Benioff and Weiss knew from nights out in Belfast pubs. Hong’s character is partly inspired by someone in the third book, melded with a figure from earlier chapters and then given her own spin. The relative unknown was chosen after Zoom auditions — where she guessed she might be doing well when new audition pages began to mention her character’s Kiwi accent.

“Jin is a genius, a particle physicist who someone tries to recruit to solve a problem inside this crazy virtual-reality game,” Hong explains. “She finds out eventually there’s a connection to aliens, and she ends up going on this crazy journey where she’s like, ‘Is science

broken? Oh, no, it’s just aliens.”

Two other key figures are Benedict Wong’s detective agent Da Shi, and Liam Cunningham’s éminence grise, Thomas Wade. Benioff and Weiss had Cunningham’s number, of course, and he dropped everything when the men who cast him as Ser Davos Seaworth in *Game Of Thrones* called. “I didn’t even know what the project was,” says Cunningham. “They just said, ‘You’re coming with us.’ And I said, ‘Yeah, I’m in.’ That’s the kind of faith I have in these guys.”

Wong, meanwhile, was fascinated to read a character breakdown about a wryly funny detective with a Mancunian accent who seemed to have a lot in common with the actor himself. There was a reason for that; Woo later confessed that they copied biographical details from Wong’s Wikipedia page to tailor the part to their first choice of star.

“It was as brazen as that,” laughs Wong. “But there’s a really interesting cocktail there. Da Shi is the gumshoe of the piece, that Columbo thing. His unkemptness is a by-product of how committed he is; he locks onto things and he gets results.” Wong met up with real secret agents to ask about the detail of their lives and shaped his character after their example, even asking for a bottle for urine in his car during a stakeout scene. The realities of high-level espionage were important because Da Shi isn’t any old investigator; he’s Thomas Wade’s right-hand man.

On set, Cunningham claimed he was still figuring Wade out, and said the character was “driving me mad”. By the time *Empire* chats to him again late in 2023, he’s calm. “It’s not fair to say he’s a shadowy figure,” says Cunningham. “But you don’t know where his power is coming from; you don’t know how he earned it. Someone asks, ‘Do you work for MI5?’ And



he says, 'No, MI5 works for me.' That's revealing, not that he's trying to hide. He's a strategist, and a bull: utterly relentless, unsentimental. He has to be amoral to get done what he needs to do."

Wade and Da Shi form an unlikely double-act, two supremely cynical realists who are either put in charge, or take charge of, coordinating humanity's response to a danger beyond even their most paranoid imaginings. The only sign of the tension they feel is in the speed of their quips to one another. "It's a bit like writing for *Littlefinger*," says Benioff of the duo. "Once you start writing for them, you get addicted."

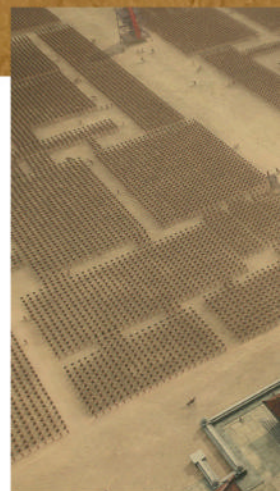
But even with such big-brained characters trying to figure out the mystery, very little in this story goes as expected. It won't, however, be surreal for its own sake, Woo assures us. "Everything you saw in the trailer, it'll all make sense in a way you would never have expected."

BACK IN JULY 2022, *EMPIRE* IS VISITING the set of *3 Body Problem* — production title 'Straight Shooter' — at Shepperton Studios in south-west London. It's day 157 of the shoot, which has taken the cast and crew around the south of England with a side trip to Spain. Wells Cathedral was cast as a virtual-reality setting within the mysterious game at the heart of the plot; Oxford played itself. Most interiors, however, were created in the more controlled surroundings of Shepperton.

Here the main unit is shooting a scene in NASA's Mission Control, where Wade, Da Shi, Jin, Saul and Raj are watching an important launch. The three producers are on the soundstage, with Weiss gregarious in a *Thrones*-style Mastodon T-shirt. Cunningham is wearing Wade's signature three-piece bespoke suit, though he shrugs off the jacket along with his English accent in-between set-ups ("Suits and neckties are not my favourite thing," grumbles Cunningham. "I'm convinced I was hung in a past life"). Wong's Da Shi makes for a stark contrast: all rumpled scruffiness next to the immaculate Wade.

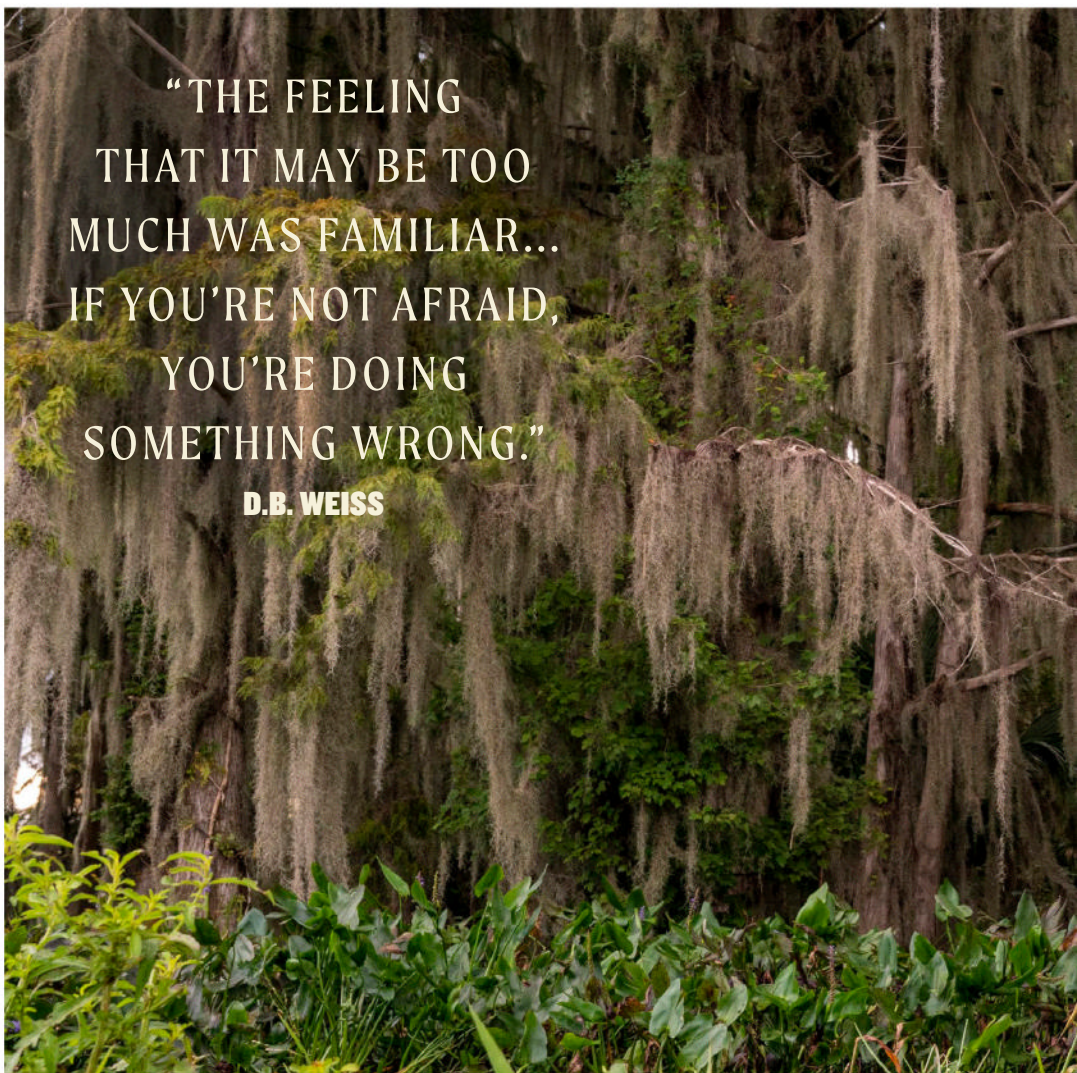
A real NASA technical director has been hired to countdown to the launch. "All stations report go for launch," he says, as Wade and the team watch to see if an ambitious mission, to make first physical contact with the aliens, will go to plan. You could cut the tension with a knife.

Across the studio, the B-unit are working on one of the show's most spectacular action scenes. The quiet civil war happening on Earth comes to a head with an attack on one side's headquarters, played out with grim inevitability and an astonishing deployment of cutting-edge technology. As *Empire* stands safely back, some invisible force severs light-fittings and glass, and screaming extras drop suddenly to the floor (they'll be cut up in post). It's chilling and more than a little monstrous, and reminds you that these are the showrunners who once threw

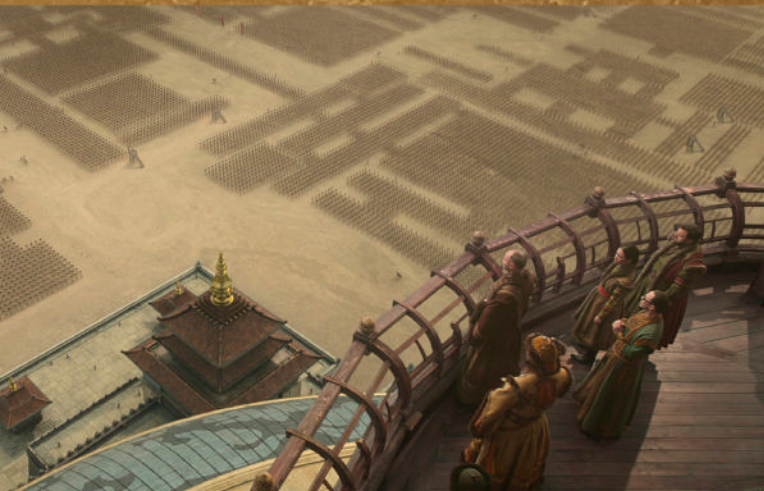


"THE FEELING  
THAT IT MAY BE TOO  
MUCH WAS FAMILIAR...  
IF YOU'RE NOT AFRAID,  
YOU'RE DOING  
SOMETHING WRONG."

D.B. WEISS







**Clockwise from top left:** Jin and Jack in peril; World-building on a grand scale; On fire: Sophon; A trepidatious Jin and Saul (Jovan Adepo); Saul and Auggie look to the skies; Executive producer-writers Alexander Woo, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss; Alex Sharp as Will Downing.

THE ONLY WORRY NOW IS THAT ALL THE exclusive locations and big action set-pieces in the world won't guarantee you an audience in the white heat of TV's streaming wars. Neither *Game Of Thrones* nor *True Blood* debuted to phenomenal numbers, but both were given the time to find their audience. Can that happen now? The showrunners can only hope for the same grace.

"There are lots of shows now, more than there have ever been, probably more than there ever will be again," acknowledges Weiss. "It makes it very difficult to make something that doesn't feel like five something elses that are out there already — and this really felt to us like it was unlike anything else. It's hard to predict how people will receive that; it's the eight-billion-body problem."

Wong, too, recognises the challenge — but he thinks there's an audience who'll be intrigued. "The book can be quite a dense read, but once you're locked in, you're on a massive journey. I think people are willing to buckle up and go on the ride. You look at these trailers and it's beyond ridiculous, a big old, 'What the actual fuck is going on? But I really want to see this.' It's like, when I watch a Christopher Nolan film, I sit up and take notes. We're not here to spoon-feed you. Work for your dinner."

At least this time they have the road map to the ending laid out. The next two books in the series, *The Dark Forest* and *Death's End*, follow humanity's quest for survival to the very end of time. "Honestly, the ending of the third book is one of my favourite endings of any giant saga of all time, so we want to get there," says Benioff. "The hardest thing is always the first season. Can we justify the big investment from Netflix? I feel like this will grow as it grows. I'm hopeful."

The showrunners are hoping that enough people will be sufficiently fascinated by the paranoia-thriller elements of the story's first half, its characters and its spectacle, that they'll hang around when things get physics-y. But whether *Thrones*-scale lightning strikes again is not the only measure of success. TV viewers, whether they can put it into words or not, need creatives who take big, bold swings on weird ideas. *Thrones* would have been notable for its levels of mayhem and murder even if it hadn't won all those plaudits; the hope is that *3 Body Problem* can provide just as many shocks and surprises. And after 40 years of sci-fi that, to one degree or another, riffs on *Star Wars*, maybe it's time someone remembered that *2001: A Space Odyssey* was a hit. 📺

3 BODY PROBLEM IS ON NETFLIX FROM 21 MARCH



a kid out of a window in *Thrones*' pilot episode.

The shoot finally wrapped up in Florida with a Cape Canaveral scene, but not before a week in the General Assembly chambers at the United Nations headquarters in New York. "That was breathtaking," remembers Wong. "It baffled me, where everyone was, when we were filming. But that's the level [of access] we're at, with Dan and Dave and Alex." If anything shows the scale of both the showrunners' ambitions, and the expectations now placed on them, closing down a world government building for a few scenes is a pretty good indication.



# SERIES

**HAVING UPSET US ALL WITH SAINT MAUD, DIRECTOR ROSE GLASS IS DOUBLING DOWN WITH BODYBUILDING THRILLER LOVE LIES BLEEDING. SHE, STAR KRISTEN STEWART AND THE TEAM TELL US HOW THEY MUSCLED UP**

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

# FLARE









**B**ose Glass' directorial debut was a shock to the system. Following a lonely carer with a violent past, determined to save a former showbiz star's soul, *Saint Maud* was a dark, atmospheric look at a young woman's downfall through extreme religious devotion. It was filled with mesmerising performances and spine-chilling moments — the words, “Fuck me”, *Empire*'s James Dyer's online reaction to watching it, were used to promote the film, and perfectly encapsulated the impact. It also introduced Glass to the world as a visionary new filmmaker, got a lot of awards attention (including two BAFTA nominations), and garnered praise from critics, audiences and Hollywood stars alike — including one who would become a huge part of Glass' next step.

“I love that movie so much,” Kristen Stewart tells *Empire*. “It's so perfectly constructed, so unruly and scary and

hilarious. If you let it sit for a while in you, and realise what it's about, you go, ‘Wow, I think that person is a genius.’” The pair arranged a meeting in London, and Glass pitched her new movie — the first time she'd done so to anyone. “I thought it had gone terribly,” the director laughs. “I just suddenly got really starstruck.” But despite Glass' nerves, it was a no-brainer for Stewart. “I was willing to do anything with her,” says the actor.

It's a good job. That new movie is *Love Lies Bleeding*, and it's one hell of a ride. A natural follow-up to *Maud* in some ways, it couldn't be more different in others. It's bigger and bolder, and the idea had been brewing a while, first coming to Glass during post-production on her debut. “I was riding this wave of confidence from having actually gotten to make a film and it not be a disaster,” she says. “So by the time *Saint Maud* was pretty much finished, I was like, ‘Fuck yeah, let's do another one.’ And early on, I had the idea that it'd be cool to do something about a bodybuilder.”

Glass was taking the notion of the ‘strong female character’ and running with it. That appealed to Stewart. “I was really





**Top to bottom:**  
Female  
bodybuilders line  
up to be judged;  
Lovers Jackie  
(Katy O'Brian)  
and Lou (Kristen  
Stewart);  
Director/co-writer  
Rose Glass  
on set.

amused and impressed by her irreverent response to being allowed to make a second movie," says the actor. "She told me she was working on something about a really strong woman, because she'd been encouraged by the industry that we function within to do that. I guess that's an easy way for people to feel good about greenlighting movies, if we overcome adversity and are like a walking affirmation. So she was like, 'I'll give you a fucking walking affirmation.'"



**W**ith Stewart cast, *Love Lies Bleeding* picked up momentum. "She was coming off the back of getting fucking Oscar-nominated [for playing Princess Diana in Pablo Larraín's *Spencer*]," says Glass. "She could do whatever she wanted. And she chooses to do this weird project with someone who's only made one film. Once she signed up, it opened a lot of doors. Suddenly it's like, 'Okay, this film is happening now.'" The heavy (weight) lifting was about to begin.

The aforementioned bodybuilder, Jackie, is played by Katy O'Brian — best known until now as *The Mandalorian*'s shifty Imperial Officer Elia Kane and freedom fighter Jentorra in *Ant-Man And The Wasp: Quantumania*. A hitchhiker with big biceps and even bigger dreams, Jackie ends up in a small town on her way to Vegas for a bodybuilding competition, where she meets gym manager Lou (Stewart). The pair fall for each other, and Jackie ends up embroiled in all kinds of trouble involving Lou's father, gun-range owner Lou Sr (Ed Harris). Co-written by Glass with film-school pal Weronika Tofiliska ("I didn't want to write by myself again, because *Saint Maud* took a long time, and I got quite stressed and lonely doing it"), *Love Lies Bleeding* is an explosive concoction. Starting out as a *Maud*-esque character study, it expanded to include crime elements, surrealism and dark comedy, all orbiting around the central romance between Jackie and Lou.

"It's ended up being a kind of anti-love story," Glass explains. "With the bodybuilding thing, Jackie's on a very singular, straight, clear trajectory," i.e. working towards her goal of competing in Vegas. "We found it interesting to think about ways that can be derailed. Romance was a good way of doing that. It's about pushing against the idea of romantic love being the ultimate aspirational thing we should all hope to achieve in life; that love necessarily transforms you for the better; that falling in love and following your dreams are inherently virtuous things."

As Stewart adds, "The movie is like, if you love something enough, you'll do absolutely anything to justify it. Or protect it."

To immerse herself in the film's realm of the extraordinarily ripped, Glass visited London weightlifting gyms, watched '80s TV shows about the sport, and studied pioneering bodybuilder Lisa Lyon. "I find the relationships people have with their bodies interesting, particularly when pushed to an extreme," Glass explains. "There's absolutely nowhere to hide with [bodybuilding]. There's nothing ambiguous about it. You only get looking that way by one route, and that's by putting in years of discipline."

Perfection of the self — particularly through drastic bodily measures — reverberates through both of Glass' films. Where *Maud* burnt her hand on the hob and put nails in her shoes in a quest to purify herself and show obedience to her deity, Jackie worships at the altar of





strength and peak physicality, pumping iron and herself full of steroids in search of acknowledgment that her body is the best of all. “There are parallels between the obsessiveness of both Maud and Jackie,” Glass confirms. “My theory is that anybody doing anything extreme, if you look closely enough, you can draw back to a motivation. It’s an interesting exercise to take someone who on the surface feels very removed from something you can relate with, but then trace it backwards to the point of empathy. It’s something I find exciting about cinema, particularly — its unique ability to put yourself in someone else’s shoes.”

Casting the right person as Jackie was vital. “I was set from early on that we had to find someone who could convincingly physically be a bodybuilder — it’s not something you can cheat — but could also act,” Glass says. “We saw hundreds of tapes. It was getting close to shoot, and we hadn’t found anyone. And then Katy’s tape appeared, and we were like, ‘Oh, thank God.’”

O’Brian had some prior experience in this muscle-bound world. “I’ve done bodybuilding competitions,” she says. “I know what it’s like to want to achieve something. The diet and

nutrition and exercises, seeing the change in your body, having that focus and discipline — I was really drawn to that.” Already in good shape, O’Brian worked with trainer Steve Zim to bulk up, doing at least an hour each of cardio and weights, six days a week. “I enjoyed the challenge,” O’Brian says. “When you change your appearance or modify yourself in some way to really jump into character, it helps. We shot almost chronologically, and so as Jackie’s training for her competition, I’m training too. I really felt like I was on board with her.”

That’s one half of *Love Lies Bleeding*’s chaotic central couple. As for the other — remember how Kristen Stewart said she was willing to do *anything* with Rose Glass?

**T**he first time we see Stewart’s Lou, she’s unblocking a toilet by hand. It’s fair to say, she’s not living her best life. “It’s 1989, we’re in the sort of butt-crack of America,” says Stewart. “[Lou]’s invisible. She can’t exist in this place. She hasn’t found any type of community. She’s withering into nothing until this girl rolls through town.” Of all the gym

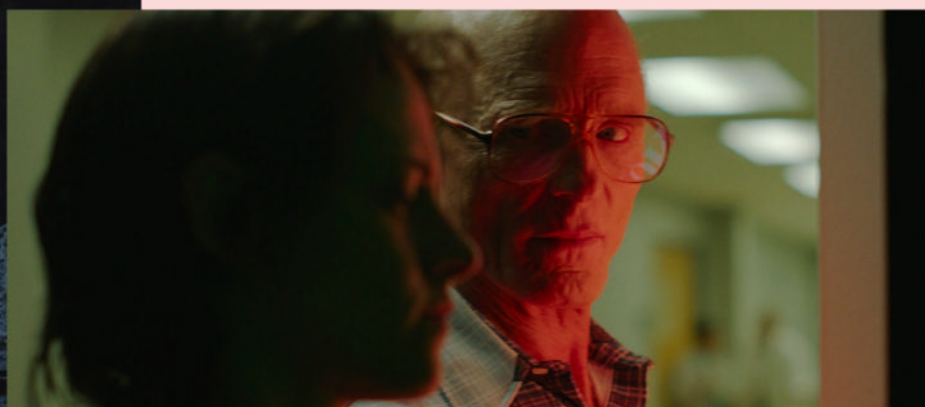
joints in all the towns in all the world, Jackie walks into Lou’s. As Glass describes, “[Lou]’s gotten very cosy and stuck in her life. Then Jackie appears, and blows her mind.”

Stewart was both an obvious and unconventional choice. “We needed someone enigmatic, mysterious, but that also had this moody, boyish thing going on,” Glass says. “Kristen seemed a natural fit. But I don’t feel she’s played many characters like this.” Stewart admits Lou isn’t anything like her — but that’s what made her so attractive. “I am such a runner,” the actor says. “I don’t like to stop. I like forward motion, so it feels like that stuckness is really opposed to my nature. You want this girl to emotionally Heimlich-manoeuvre herself into being. It’s just satisfying.”

Satisfaction also stems from someone like Lou being front and centre in a bold, bloody, big-screen adventure like this one. “This girl in particular would never normally be the protagonist,” Stewart says. “She’d be the weird friend underlining some kind of otherness, that wasn’t at the forefront.” If there’s one thing you can count on from Rose Glass, it’s that characters usually considered



**Clockwise from left:** Life's a blast: Lou and Jackie have an explosive time together; Infatuated Daisy (Anna Baryshnikov) with her crush; Lou's brother-in-law JJ (Dave Franco) is easily distracted; Red devil: the hell-raising, menacing Lou Sr (Ed Harris) with his daughter.



outsiders get to enjoy the limelight.

Between Jackie's relentless drive and Lou being stuck in a rut, their emotional differences are significant. So too are their physical ones, and how they play against expectation when it comes to strength versus weakness, femininity versus masculinity, dominance versus submission. ("It's an interesting dynamic to have Kristen, who's much smaller than me, as my big tough lover," says O'Brian.) Queerness is baked right into this movie — in its gaze, in its sex, in its power dynamics. "Binaries are a bit boring," says Glass. "It's all very fertile ground to play with, doing something about a female bodybuilder. It shouldn't be that shocking to see somebody who looks like these two do in a film — but there's still something quite punk about a really muscular woman."

The main obstacle between the pair living happily ever after is Lou's father, also called Lou, played menacingly and idiosyncratically by screen legend Ed Harris. He's a guy who has his fingers in many illegal pies, and who has a lingering hold over his daughter. He's also a guy who just really loves bugs. Eating them, examining them, keeping them as pets. "That

was part of the attraction [to the role], to tell you the truth," Harris admits. "I just thought it was a great aspect of my character."

Even more memorable than Lou Sr's creepy-crawly collection is his appearance — he's bald on top of his head with long hair flowing down from the sides, and enormous glasses. Harris and Glass concocted the sleazy look together. "He basically came up with that," the director recalls. "I asked her, 'What if the guy has a ponytail?'" says Harris, "so I had really long extensions put in, and figured when Rose saw it, we'd cut them. But she said, 'No, let's keep it like that.' So I've got this long hair, which was pretty hysterical."

That comedy was part of the charm — and the aim to constantly play with stereotypes — for Glass. "It's taking the archetypal evil patriarch in a direction you wouldn't expect," she explains. "In some scenes, he looks terrifying; in some, he looks pretty funny." Make no mistake, though — Lou Sr is a wrong'un, as Harris teases: "He really is kind of represented as the devil." Where *Saint Maud* was all about ascension towards God, *Love Lies Bleeding* descends somewhere darker.

**L**ove Lies Bleeding marks a huge increase in scale for Glass. There's the American setting (which wasn't always on the cards — "Very early on, we toyed with it being set in Scotland," Glass recalls. "We liked the idea of having this burly, butch, Glaswegian lesbian love story — but maybe that wasn't as easy to get financed"). There's the A-list cast, the bigger budget, the trickier balance of tone and genres. There's the remote, challenging New Mexico location (O'Brian cites the heat, the spiders, and swarms of gnats as the most difficult elements). There's the ensemble of characters, far bigger than the two-hander of *Saint Maud* — including Lou's sister Beth (Jena Malone), her husband JJ (Dave Franco), and the Lou-obsessed Daisy (Anna Baryshnikov). How did Glass feel about taking all of this on?

"It was sort of terrifying," she admits. "I didn't realise what a step up it was until I was actually out there shooting it. Every now and then, there'd be days where you'd look around like, 'Oh fuck, what have I done?' But by then, it's too late to worry, so you just get on with it." There was terror, but also a thrill. "It was exciting to try doing something I wasn't totally sure I could pull off".

Yet while this film may be much bigger, there's a lot of overlap with *Saint Maud*. There are the themes of obsession and extremity; shifting focus to those who are outsiders in their community; the shocking violence; and a hint of the supernatural and fantastical. Most importantly for Glass, it's her overall approach to filmmaking that's staying consistent.

"Even though this was a much bigger sandpit to play in, I tried whenever possible to keep the same ethos and mentality of making the small intimate thing," she says. "For all the big, bombastic stuff that happens, the main thing in it is this love story, and this very intimate relationship, as with *Saint Maud*. It's looking at the hopefully exciting, knotty, psychological stuff between characters in small spaces. I've naturally been quite drawn to exploring the morally ambiguous areas of people's behaviour, and looking at people making bad decisions, but trying to figure out why."

It's that kind of vision that makes Glass such an exciting British filmmaking talent, and *Love Lies Bleeding* such an intriguing, refreshing prospect. "We are constantly watching movies about women triumphing over oppressive forces because we're somehow ethically or morally superior," says Stewart. "It's like, 'No, fuck that. I'm so sick of that. I'm so sick of that fucking movie.' And so this one just felt like we were allowed to pull our dress over our head and run down the street, use the boys' toys and shove them in their faces — and then also be like, 'We're nothing like you.'"

God only knows the poster quotes that await with this one. 🕸

LOVE LIES BLEEDING IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 APRIL



# final cut



A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

APRIL 2024 | EDITED BY CHRIS HEWITT

## The Snow King

J.A. BAYONA ON THE LONG JOURNEY TO THE SCREEN OF *SOCIETY OF THE SNOW*, AND THE PATHS HE ALMOST TOOK ALONG THE WAY

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

J.A. BAYONA'S HAUNTING, evocative and beautiful *Society Of The Snow* is the very definition of a passion project. The Spanish director has been trying to adapt Pablo Vierci's retelling of the legendary true story of the members of an amateur Uruguayan rugby team who managed to survive against all the odds after their plane crashed into the Andes from the moment he read it, while prepping his second movie, *The Impossible*. That he's now finally done it marks the end of a ten-year odyssey that has seen him plot his path from his Spanish-language debut, the horror *The Orphanage*, to a series of English-language movies and TV shows — *A Monster Calls*, *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, *The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power* — that combine his facility for the fantastical with his fascination with chronicling the indomitability of the human spirit. *Society Of The Snow* very much focuses on the latter, and in an expansive interview, Bayona sat down with *Empire* to talk about intuition and choices...

**You first read Pablo Vierci's book when you were about to shoot *The Impossible*. But it then took ten years for you to make. What was the chief impediment?**

The fact we wanted to shoot in Spanish. If it's in

Spanish, I think you cannot get, for the whole world, more than ten million dollars. It's impossible to shoot this film with [that] budget. So we spent ten years trying to get the financing from the independent market, and it was impossible because it was in Spanish. We were about to give up, and Netflix gave us the numbers we were looking for [a reported €65 million]. They gave us final cut, they were totally okay with using a cast of unknown actors. We couldn't say no.

**The decision to make it in the Spanish language is really interesting. *The Impossible* was made in the English language, and took a Spanish family's situation...**

That was a Spanish family living in Japan, and spending their holidays in Thailand. Maria Belón, who is the real person the story is based on, one of the conditions she asked for was that the family didn't have a nationality. She wanted this family to somehow present something more universal. So there's no mention of where they're from. That was not a big change. But in this case, the context was very important. Uruguay, the '70s, being close to the reality, having the luxury of working closely with the survivors, it was not possible to represent the culture and the socio-political



context of the time if we were going to shoot in English with foreign actors.

**Did you try to make this movie after *The Impossible*?**

Actually, I was [offered] the first *Jurassic World* right after *The Impossible*, but right before *A Monster Calls*. At the time there was no script; we had to get into production without a finished script. And we only had six months of preparation. I remember that I had to say no, and it was hard to say no, because I really wanted to work with Steven Spielberg. I told him, "There's nothing I would like to do more in my life than make a film together with you, but I'm not that guy. I need time." And after [that] I went into the sequel for *World War Z*, and we spent a long time developing the script. We came up with great ideas, great set-pieces. But I didn't want to create





Above: J.A. Bayona on location for *Society Of The Snow*. Left: Naomi Watts as Maria and Tom Holland as Lucas in *The Impossible*.

a film based on set-pieces. So I decided, “I’m not ready, I can’t do this.” It was hard, very hard.

**And through all of this, you were working on *Society Of The Snow* on the side?**

Recently I saw Jeremy Kleiner, the producer [of that unmade *World War Z* sequel], and he told me, “You finally did the rugby players film!” So at that time we were already talking about it. We were obsessed with this story from the moment we read the book. It’s so powerful. We were telling everyone the story. We had to secure the rights again and again and again, and every time we did it with our own money. It was super-expensive. There was a moment when Belén Atienza, my producing partner, asked me, “Are we sure that we want to do this? Because it’s costing us a lot of money.” And I said, “Yes, we should try.” I really wanted to do this film after *A Monster Calls*, >



but it was not possible. Then I got into *Jurassic World* [*Fallen Kingdom*], and after that I sat down with the writers [on *Society Of The Snow*]. But I didn't like the script. Every time we reduced the story to dialogue and action, it felt like a story I had seen before. It was not touching the spiritual aspect of the book I loved. So I threw that script into the bin and said, "We need to start from scratch." And in that moment they offered me the first two episodes of *The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power*, and I thought, "It's only two episodes while the writers work on a new draft." Then I went to New Zealand and it was very demanding, and I didn't really have much time to work on *Society Of The Snow*. Then the pandemic happened, we stopped production on *Rings Of Power*, and I found some time to work on the script. So after I delivered the cut of the first two episodes, I jumped into *Society Of The Snow*.

**Did you see this as a companion piece to *The Impossible*? Can you see why people might put those films together?**

Yeah. I think you cannot separate the origin of *The Impossible* from *Society Of The Snow*. I think *Society Of The Snow* touches a little bit more on complexity. When you see Tom Holland's character in [*The Impossible*], he's doing the right thing. He's getting the reward. His mother tells him at the end, "I love you." But in this story you have Numa [Enzo Vogrincic], and he's doing the right thing, and he's not getting the reward. And he tries to make it better, and the more he tries, the more the mountain is forcing him to behave in a different way. Which deals with the complexity of what it means to be alive, what it means to be human.

**You mentioned Spielberg, and I know you're something of a student of his. Is he one of the pillars of filmmaking that got you interested in the first place?**

I was obsessed with film since I was a kid. I remember watching *Superman* when I was three, four years old, and I came back home and I did a drawing of that scene where you can see the train passing by on top of these broken train tracks, and in the gap is Superman. And then I put the paper in front of a lamp and started to turn on and off the light, so I was able to see Superman appearing and disappearing. There was no home video. I didn't have a camera, but I was trying to get back that experience of watching the film. But I don't have a memory of deciding to be a filmmaker. I was able to watch all the classics on television when I was a kid. We only had one TV station in Spain and they used to play every night a classic. It was Hitchcock movies, Kubrick movies, Kurosawa movies. And I discovered later on that those were films that created an impact on Steven Spielberg. So it's not that I learned the language of the camera watching his films, but somehow we have a very similar sensibility.

**Right:** Filming the terrible aftermath of *Society Of The Snow*'s crash. **Below, clockwise from left:** *A Monster Calls* (2016); *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (2018); Bayona shooting his dinosaur epic.



***Society Of The Snow* brought Spielberg to mind. Because in this, and *The Impossible* and *A Monster Calls*, like he does, you derive a big emotional impact from the audience without ever seeming manipulative. What's your technique for doing that?**

I think it's a question of being honest. You need to find something in the story that you connect with in a very strong way. I was able to connect with Numa in a very intimate way, this need that he has to be accepted. You need to connect with the characters. The other day someone asked me if my films were dark. I'm not interested in darkness. I'm interested in *my* darkness. I'd really like to throw some light in there, that's what I'm interested in. That's why the films are

**"I'm not interested in darkness; I'm interested in my darkness."**





**Below, top to bottom:**  
 Wrapped up on location for *Society Of The Snow*;  
 Bringing to life Tolkein's fantasy land on set of *The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power*.



intense, but they are positive. I'm not interested in a cynical idea of the world. I feel now like I'm talking to my therapist, and I'm trying to find a reason for what I do. You need to follow your intuition. That's the only thing that will keep your work consistent, that you express your ideas beyond your ability to articulate them with words. Intuition has been my guiding light throughout all my career.

**Your choices are always fascinating. And you've talked already about the paths you could have taken. Has *Superman* ever come up for you? Have you ever had conversations about making a *Superman* movie?**

No, I never... [Pauses, thinks] Well, yes! I remember that... I never talked about this, but I remember that before I was shooting *The Impossible*, I loved the idea of doing a *Superman* film. And they were going to do a new *Superman* film. Christopher Nolan was about to produce that film, so I sent through my agent a letter to Christopher Nolan, and I gave him my pitch. My approach to *Superman* was, basically it needed to feel real. The whole point of *Superman* is that image of Clark ripping his shirt and discovering the 'S' on his chest, which is the idea that any one of us can be *Superman*. He's an aspirational character. And Richard Donner did that so well. So I said, "The film needs to be grounded." Metropolis needed to look real because the whole point of the story was, "How can you convince, in a very subliminal way, the audience that each of us can be *Superman*?" I remember I went to Alicante, where we shot *The Impossible*, and we were going to shoot in three, four weeks, and doing all these tests with the water tank to see how we were going to do the tsunami. And then I got an email telling me, "Chris Nolan would like to sit down with you and talk about *Superman*." I was like, "I'm shooting a film in three weeks. What is the schedule for this film?" They said, "They cannot wait for you to finish that film." I said, "Okay, then, it's wrong timing." I didn't remember that. You brought that memory back to me.

**What's next?**

Holidays. Big holidays. I did *A Monster Calls*, *Jurassic World*, *Rings Of Power*, and *Society Of The Snow* in seven years, which is a lot. I really need some time to stop and think, to reset my mind.

**To give the intuition time to recharge.**

It's true. Intuition is the greatest tool an actor can have to approach character, and I think it's the same for directors. Actually, Steven Spielberg talks about that. He talks about this voice behind his ear, telling him what to do. Intuition is very important because it connects with the deepest part of your soul, it connects with something you really want to tell. And that goes beyond words. A journalist once approached Fellini and asked him, "What's your next film about?" And he answers, "I just found out what my previous film was about!" Which is a way of telling you that when it comes from here, from the deepest part of your soul, when you're able to finally communicate that with the audience, that's when I think I'm doing the right thing.

**SOCIETY OF THE SNOW IS OUT NOW ON NETFLIX**





THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

# Top Secret!

ZUCKER-ABRAHAMS-ZUCKER'S  
HIDDEN GEM

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

JERRY ZUCKER, Jim Abrahams and David Zucker had a problem. It was one entirely of their own making, but a problem nonetheless. In 1980, they were flying high on the back of the enormous success of *Airplane!*, their disaster-movies spoof that, thanks to its relentless pacing and incessant bombardment of visual gags and inspired wordplay, all delivered with the straightest of faces by the straightest of actors, had very quickly been elevated into the comedic pantheon.

Immediately, they began to concern themselves with their follow-up project, and wanted to remain in the sphere of spoofery. They initially talked about a movie which would target cop dramas and film noir, before reconfiguring it as the TV show *Police Squad!*, which would be cancelled after just six wildly misunderstood episodes (and would then be reconfigured a few years later as *The Naked Gun*). Bloodied but unbowed by that bump in the road, they started talking about ideas for their next movie. *Airplane!* had been a micro-specific, quasi-remake of a 1957 disaster movie called *Zero Hour!*, and *Police Squad!* had been a piss-take of police dramas. For their next movie, though, they were torn between embracing two topics: World War II movies and Elvis Presley flicks. Naturally, the trio decided to do them both. At the same time. And thus, *Top Secret!* was born.

Shorn of the strictures of structure, Zucker, Abrahams and Zucker (who shall henceforth be known as ZAZ, because a) that's their accepted common moniker, and b) we'll run out of space otherwise) concocted a story so rampantly ridiculous that there's virtually no point in recounting it, because nobody will believe you. All you need to know is that Val Kilmer, in his debut role, plays Nick Rivers, a rock star who is invited to East Germany at a point in time that could either be immediately after World War II, or the 1960s, or just after the Jimmy Carter Presidency (or all three), and ends up battling Nazis with the aid of the French Resistance and the woman he loves. And we haven't even mentioned the bit where Nick's manager is killed after impaling himself on a sex toy called The Anal Intruder.



If it wasn't already abundantly clear, *Top Secret!* is the work of three absolute lunatics, who were handed \$6 million of Paramount's money by the then heads of the studio, Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg, and effectively left to their own devices. This is a good thing. Studios should do more of this sort of thing, quite frankly.

Comedy is, perhaps more than any other genre in movies, subjective. One person's thigh-slapper can be another person's stony-facer. But the beauty of *Top Secret!* is that, no matter your mood or your resistance levels, it'll get you one way or another. It's not just the volume of gags — although its CPM (that's chuckles per minute) is absolutely on a par with *Airplane!*'s — it's the variety. There are comedy songs (sung wonderfully by Kilmer, generating the kind of laughs he then spent over a decade running away from), if that's your bag. If it isn't, fear not, because there are sight gags galore. There is punnage. There is the funniest shoot-out of all time. There's a bit where a bloke gets a blow job from a cow. One of the songs

Kilmer sings is called 'How Silly Can You Get?', and ZAZ seemed to embrace that as their personal mission statement. Very few movies have been so smart about being so daft.

Now ZAZ had the money to fully journey into the surreal, so they could pull off a gag where a train appears to be pulling out of a station, only for the camera to then reveal that it's actually the *station* that's moving away while the train stays put. But they also had the commitment to the bit and the vision that allowed them to conceive of, and execute, two of the most elaborate gags ever put on film. Much has been made over the years of the scene set in a Swedish bookstore, featuring guest star Peter Cushing (sporting one giant eye, naturally) which, for reasons, is played backwards (and was shot in one take. And rightly so, for it is amazing, and there's every chance a 14-year-old Christopher Nolan saw it, loved it, and filed it away for future reference ("mental note: remove the funny bits").

But that's to overlook the glorious oddness of the underwater fist-fight, which starts out as



# PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **CHRIS HEWITT**



## 1 **WONKA**

(OUT 4 MARCH, DVD/BR/4K/DIGITAL)

One of the great joys of last year came right at the tail-end, as Paul King brought much of that *Paddington* magic to this prequel, which saw Timothée Chalamet sing and dance his way around a storybook city as a young Willy Wonka. As uplifting as a hoverchoc, with great Neil Hannon songs and pure imagination all over the shop.

## 2 **DREAM SCENARIO**

(OUT 4 MARCH, DVD/BR/DIGITAL)

Unfairly overlooked in this year's Oscar race, Kristoffer Borgli's startling debut film has at its core a truly great Nicolas Cage performance, as an unassuming college professor who finds himself showing up in people's dreams and becomes a celebrity as a result, until it all comes crashing down. Borgli beautifully navigates the tonal shift from absurdist comedy to nightmarish onslaught, while Cage delivers a sad-sack for the ages.

## 3 **THE MARVELS**

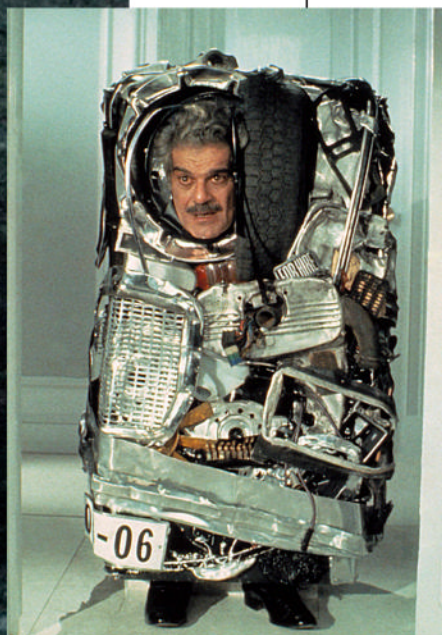
(OUT 19 FEBRUARY, DVD/BR/DIGITAL/DISNEY+)

The first proper MCU box-office flop (making barely over \$200 million) is much more fun than that suggests, with the interplay between Brie Larson's Captain Marvel, Iman Vellani's Kamala Khan and Teyonah Parris' Monica Rambeau light and funny throughout. Not top-tier MCU by any stretch, but worth a look.

## 4 **MR BATES VS THE POST OFFICE**

(OUT 19 FEBRUARY, DVD)

The colossal impact of this four-part ITV series, written by Gwyneth Hughes and directed by James Strong, cannot be ignored, it finally focusing government attention and action on the appalling Post Office scandal — in which hundreds of sub-postmasters were wrongly accused (and many convicted) of stealing from the Post Office, when faulty software was to blame. As a piece of drama, it's solid — and will likely provoke overwhelming feelings of righteous rage.



**Clockwise from main:** American rock singer Nick Rivers (Val Kilmer) is held up by Nazis; Agent Cedric (Omar Sharif) has car trouble...; ...While Nick has some toilet trouble; Bookshop owner (Peter Cushing) has his eye on you.

a relatively simple bit of business before slowly revealing the existence of an entire Wild West saloon under the waves, complete with poker players, a barman who gives Nick a bottle with which to hit the bad guy, and a chandelier which comes crashing to the ground after a stray shot. In its own way, it may be one of the most complex fights ever staged. And almost certainly one of the barmiest.

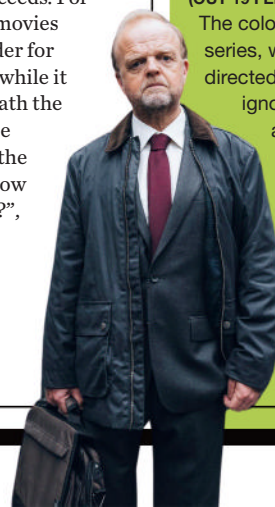
Despite ZAZ's best and most inspired efforts, though, *Top Secret!* lived up to its name. It was 1984's best-kept secret at the box office, faring poorly at a time when audiences were flocking to big-name comedies like *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Ghostbusters*. Ignominy of ignominies, though, it was also outgrossed by *Revenge Of The Nerds*.

Still, things change, people change, hairstyles change. And so do opinions. Like many flops before it, it's had a slow but undeniable renaissance over the years. Nevertheless, its reception stung ZAZ, who, when *Empire* caught up with them about a decade ago, felt they should have done more to provide compelling

characters or a story that had, well, a story.

But that's somewhat missing the point. *Top Secret!* was conceived as a pure gag-machine, and on that front it more than succeeds. For this writer, it's the greatest of the movies ZAZ made, and is a strong contender for Funniest Movie Of All Time. And, while it may not have much going on beneath the surface, it tackles some pretty huge questions: "Who do you favour in the Virginia Slims tournament?", "Know any good white basketball players?", and, "How silly can you get?" And that one, in particular, may be the biggest question of them all.

**TOP SECRET! IS OUT NOW ON DVD AND  
PARAMOUNT+**







**SPOILER SPECIAL**

# What If...? Season 2

**DIRECTOR BRYAN ANDREWS  
ON THE STANDOUT EPISODES OF  
THE MCU ANIMATED SERIES**

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

SEASON 2 OF *What If...?*, the animated show that presents alternative outcomes of key moments in the history of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, was something of a belter, with an all-star cast (mostly) returning to voice surprising, striking, and funny developments for their characters. Supervising director Bryan Andrews is already working hard on Season 3, but took time out to talk *Empire* through the key episodes.

## **EPISODE 1: WHAT IF...? NEBULA JOINED THE NOVA CORPS**

This one was the result of a major, and late-in-the-day, switcheroo. Initially, Episode 5, a direct sequel to a Season 1 episode in which Hayley Atwell's Peggy Carter became a super-soldier instead of Steve Rogers, was meant to kick off the season, to reinforce Peggy's status as its de facto lead. Instead, this episode — featuring Karen Gillan as Nebula, the only major *Guardians Of The Galaxy* cast-member to return — was brought forward from Season 3, kicking things off with a neat *Blade Runner*-ish twist as Nebula becomes a hardbitten private investigator, uncovering something rotten at the core of Xandar. "I always wanted to do one that was like hard noir," says Andrews. "I love to push a genre. We'll always find an emotional hook, but you gotta start somewhere."

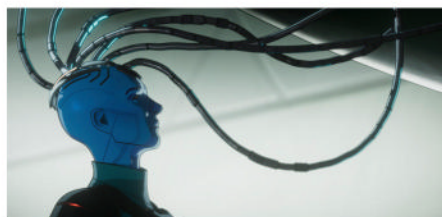
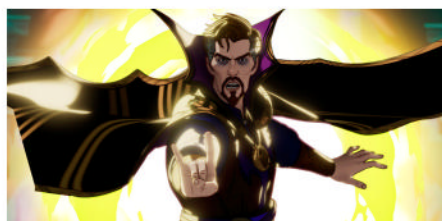
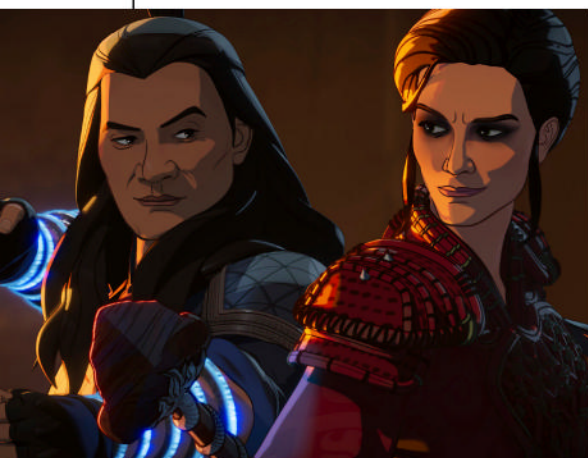
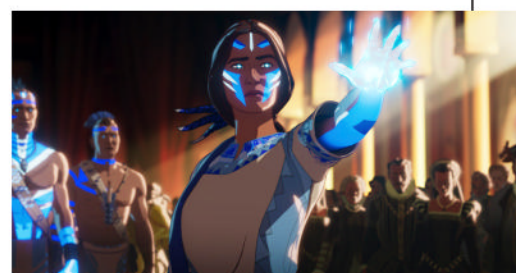
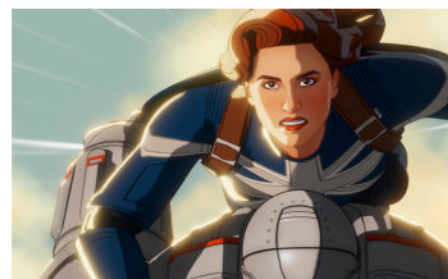
## **EPISODE 3: WHAT IF...? HAPPY HOGAN SAVED CHRISTMAS**

A joyous episode in which Andrews and writers A.C. Bradley and Matthew Chauncey riff relentlessly on *Die Hard*, as Happy Hogan (Jon Favreau) is forced to save Avengers Tower on Christmas Eve from the MCU's very own Hans Gruber, Sam Rockwell's Justin Hammer. As well as directly referencing specific shots from *Die Hard*, the episode gets its super-heroic heft when Happy accidentally injects himself with Bruce Banner's blood, becoming a raging purple beast. You might think that this began life as a throwaway 'Hulk Hogan' pun in the writers' room, but Happy turning into a character known as the Freak originated in the comics. "Jon said, 'I'll do a voice for you guys if I get to be the Freak some time,'" laughs Andrews. "And then we were like, 'Yeah, we'll throw Christmas on top of it.'" A very happy Christmas indeed.

## **EPISODE 6: WHAT IF...? KAHHORI RESHAPED THE WORLD**

The season's biggest and boldest swing is a major tweak on the established formula, focusing on a brand-new character — Kahhori, a Native American girl who is imbued with incredible powers by exposure to the Tesseract, and uses them to explore a new dimension and rise up





against colonialism. “Early on when I was brought on to *What If...?*, we were thinking about broad concepts,” says Andrews. “And I mentioned at some point, ‘What if colonisation never happened?’” Andrews’ initial pitch involved Vibranium being found somewhere other than Wakanda, but over time they zeroed in on what it became, with writer Ryan Little coming on board to craft Kahhori (voiced by Devery Jacobs) and her people from the Mohawk nation. “Ryan nerded out for it, because he hails from the region, and there was a lot of stuff he had already studied. We talked to consultants of the Mohawk nation about their mythology and belief systems and that gave us fuel to do things like the Sky World and the whole notion of thunder beams. It sounds like superheroes already! And it just clicked.”

### EPISODE 7: WHAT IF...? HELA FOUND THE TEN RINGS

With the likes of Tom Hiddleston, Chris Hemsworth, Benedict Cumberbatch, Hayley Atwell, Paul Rudd and Jeffrey Wright (as narrator the Watcher) on board, *What If...?* isn't lacking for star voices. But there was a major bump in this episode as Cate Blanchett returned to breathe the fiery life into her *Thor: Ragnarok* villain Hela. Andrews admits they wouldn't have done the episode had Blanchett not indicated a willingness

to come back, but it allowed him and Chauncey room to develop an episode in which Hela falls in love with Wenwu, aka the Mandarin and wielder of the ultra-powerful Ten Rings, and undergo a redemption arc, one of the major themes of the season. “It’s interesting taking villains who are serving a certain purpose and seeing them go through a change,” says Andrews. By the end, Hela is reinvented as “the Goddess Of Light”, and he holds out hope we might see that version of the character in live-action one day. “From our lips to Kevin [Feige]’s ears,” he laughs. “Seeing the Gandalf The White version of Hela would be awesome.”

### EPISODE 8: WHAT IF...? THE AVENGERS ASSEMBLED IN 1602

“We don’t ever want to just do the comic,” says Andrews of how the *What If...?* team (including head writer A.C. Bradley, and producers Brad Winderbaum and Kevin Feige) approach adapting source material. Most *What If...?* episodes are culled from MCU moments, but some — like Season 1’s *Marvel Zombies* riff and this episode, in which a number of characters are transplanted to the year 1602 and reimagined as Elizabethan heroes and villains, are directly inspired by comics. Visiting the world of 1602 (also imagined in a 2003 limited series by writer Neil Gaiman and

artist Andy Kubert) had long been on Andrews’ list. “It’s our own version, which is exciting.” Here, it allowed them to reinvent Steve Rogers as the outlaw known as Rogers Hood, and give him and Peggy Carter yet another tragic farewell as he flashes back to his own time. “It’s so sad,” laughs Andrews. “But I would wager that there’s a huge amount of universes where they get together.”

### EPISODE 9: WHAT IF...? STRANGE SUPREME INTERVENED

Peggy is again front and centre in the final episode, in which Cumberbatch returns as Strange Supreme, a dark and twisted, mega-powerful version of Doctor Strange who wishes to, essentially, endanger the Multiverse in order to resurrect his world and one true love, Christine Palmer. Strange Supreme emerged as a hero towards the end of Season 1, so it’s something of a shock to see him backsliding so dramatically. “Grief can be a rough demon,” explains Andrews. “People do slip, and it speaks to that. But he always thinks he can fix a thing. ‘Dude, you already blew that lesson once, are you really gonna try this again?’” Strange Supreme is dealt with by the end, but don’t rule out another appearance in Season 3. Stranger things have happened...

WHAT IF...? SEASON 2 IS ON DISNEY+ NOW



# Star power

## JOHN SAYLES TALKS HIS TEX-MEX MASTERPIECE, *LONE STAR*

WORDS IAN FREER

TITAN OF THE US Independent Scene™ John Sayles hadn't seen his 1996 masterpiece *Lone Star* with an audience for years. But, after watching it recently at the Egyptian Theatre in Los Angeles in a spiffy new Criterion Collection restoration, he seems pleased with his handiwork.

"I don't really rank our movies," he says. "But I was very happy with the casting. I was very happy with the music. When I think of the films, I think of the experience of making them and some experiences were nicer than others. This was one where we had enough money."

The idea started percolating in Sayles' mind nearly 20 years before shooting, when he was on location for Joe Dante's *Piranha*, doing rewrites on the screenplay and appearing in a cameo as 'Sentry'. On a day off from filming in Aquarena Springs in Texas, he took a trip to visit the Alamo, the site of a famous siege (and Davy Crockett's death) in 1836, and was confronted by a Chicano protest group illuminating the Mexican side of the story.

"I knew the Disney myth and the 1960 John Wayne movie [*The Alamo*]," he says. "I started looking into the story, but rather than trying to make a low-budget version of the Alamo, which would not be easy to do, I said, 'There's something interesting here: what do we do with our legends when they don't help us anymore?' And I got this idea. 'Well, what if it's a family legend?'"

It's the law when talking about *Lone Star* to describe it as "novelistic". A sprawling, rich, complex (but never confusing) story of multiple characters and shifting timeframes, it kickstarts with the discovery of a skull in the desert surrounding the small Texas border town of Frontera. Local lawman Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper), the son of late, legendary Sheriff Buddy Deeds (Matthew McConaughey in flashback), begins an investigation, a typically Saylesian affair with genre tropes and interpersonal relationships intermingling with social issues (racism, cultural identity) played out with a deep empathy for its characters.

Plot-wise, *Lone Star* fits squarely into the



detective/film-noir genre, but its setting and style come straight from the Western. Sayles' key influences include the Marlon Brando flick *One-Eyed Jacks* ("a messy father-son thing") and the genre's widescreen obsession, from the use of Dutch-tilted close-ups in Sergio Leone to backdrops being employed as a storytelling tool. "What's behind the character is telling you half the story emotionally, just as much as the characters in the foreground," he says. "We were very careful with the locations that we found."

*Lone Star's* most thrilling visual gambit is the way scenes slide from past to present without cutting, clever staging turning the '90s into the '50s. "There's a famous William Faulkner phrase, 'The past is not over. It's not even past,'" says Sayles. "One of the reasons that I planned those shots where you're going from one time period to another without a cut is that none of us get to start from scratch. We come into the world that we grow up in, and there are certain beliefs and worldviews that we just absorb."

To play out the story, Sayles assembled one of the greatest casts of the '90s. Chris Cooper anchors the film as Sam Deeds ("Chris looks like an iconic American but he's also an actor

## "Chris Cooper looks like an iconic American."

who can play subtext"), surrounded by great turns from Kris Kristofferson, Joe Morton, Elizabeth Peña, Clifton James and a very young Matthew McConaughey.

"I was looking for somebody who was not known," Sayles says. "I didn't want them to have that kind of star weight. I had seen him in *Dazed And Confused*, which at the time was the only movie he'd been in, and thought, 'That guy's a Texan, a guy who could wear the hat and the boots comfortably. He's got a lot of charisma and he's a hard-working actor who focuses in on the moment, which is what you always want. Every once in a while, you just





**Clockwise from main:**  
Man in the hat: Chris Cooper as Sheriff Sam Deeds; Sheriff Charlie Wade (Kris Kristofferson) doles out some rough justice; Joe Morton as tough army colonel Delmore Payne; Matthew McConaughey as Sam's father Buddy, in flashback; John Sayles directing Elizabeth Peña on set.

get lucky, I guess."

Nominated for Best Original Screenplay (it lost to *Fargo*), *Lone Star* remains undimmed, appearing regularly on 'Best Of The '90s' lists, and is generally considered the director's greatest work. Its induction into the Criterion Collection is particularly meaningful to Sayles, shining a light on a difficult-to-categorise film.

"All movies are out there tenuously," he suggests. "Some are there because they get shown a lot. I made *Eight Men Out*, which is a baseball movie, and they play it a lot around World Series time. I wrote *The Howling* and that gets shown a lot around Halloween. But other films fall through the cracks and don't get seen that often. So when the Criterion Collection picks something up, it's not like going on Netflix or Amazon. They do such a good job of curating. It's like when novelists go into a bookstore, find their book, and put the cover facing out. It just looks special."

Shockingly, Sayles hasn't been able to get a film off the ground since 2013's *Go For Sisters*. "I have three or four movies I'd love to make and none of them are that expensive, but it's just really hard for anybody to make a standalone feature now," he levels. "If your last three movies haven't made tens of millions of dollars in profit for people, you're just not on the list." In the light of *Lone Star*'s refurbished brilliance, his absence from filmmaking remains a bigger mystery than anything faced by Sam Deeds.

**LONE STAR IS OUT ON 26 FEBRUARY ON CRITERION COLLECTION  
4K UHD AND BLU-RAY**



# The Ranking

## The *Scream* films

DO WE LIKE SCARY MOVIES? FOUR *EMPIRE* WRITERS TACKLE GHOSTFACE AND CO.



SELMAN HOŞGÖR

### OUR CRITICS



**HELEN O'HARA**

Her favourite scary movie? *Aliens*, or *The Thing*.



**MIKE MUNCER**

His favourite scary movie? *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.



**BEN TRAVIS**

His favourite scary movie? *Evil Dead II*.



**CHRIS HEWITT**

His favourite scary movie? Where Leslie Nielsen is President.

**Chris:** So, the *Scream* series. The franchise that began under director Wes Craven and writer Kevin Williamson way back in 1996. It gets a lot of props for its meta approach to slasher films, but it did a lot more. It introduced the idea of an opening kill, and a whodunnit.

**Mike:** It's such a fun format. It's one of the most consistent horror franchises.

**Helen:** There are no bad *Scream* movies. But there are less good *Scream* movies. What's impressive is not just the meta angle, and the way people know the rules of horror movies and the killers are mostly motivated by those same rules. That's exciting and cool, but they also work as slasher movies. Ghostface has an incredibly iconic design, and there are legendary kills.

**Chris:** I think there are genuinely great suspense sequences. I'm thinking Sidney trying to evade Ghostface in her locked car in the first *Scream*. Of course, it helps when you have a master like Wes Craven at the helm.

**Mike:** That first movie, particularly, is so perfect because you've got that balance of Kevin Williamson, who adds a bit of satire and commentary on the genre, but Wes Craven is directing it like a proper horror film.

**Ben:** There's so much fun, meta, comedic stuff, but when these films go for the jugular, they fucking go for it. You have that opening sequence with Drew Barrymore.

**Chris:** For me, that's up there with the great opening sequences, not just in slasher films, but in horror films. And maybe just in general cinema. **Mike:** It works as a short film. It's just a perfect ten minutes of film, isn't it?

**Ben:** I don't think there's a greater visual metaphor than the popcorn in the pan bubbling away and, as the phone call is getting more sinister, the popcorn is starting to pop more and more loudly.

**Helen:** She was front and centre in the trailer and the marketing, too. I think it took a lot of people by surprise. Killing the big star so that nobody feels safe is really clever.

**Chris:** It established that *Scream* formula. There's an opening kill, a grand unmasking and monologue that happens at the end of every instalment. Can anything top that first opening?

**Ben:** There's such exuberance in the attempts. My personal favourite is either *Scream 4*, for the insane film-within-a-film-within-a-film, or *Scream 5*, which is the only one that doesn't actually open with a kill.

**Helen:** That feels a little bit too close to the first one. I enjoy *Scream 2* and the crazy over-the-top nature of it. And *Scream 6* with the phone call in the restaurant, and the dark alley. And that wasn't even technically the Ghostface from that movie.

**Chris:** *Scream 3*, which I think is by far the weakest, is the only intro in which a major character dies: Liev Schreiber's Cotton Weary.

**Mike:** *Scream* is the best opening, then it's *Scream 2*. We've got the fun, meta layer, it's so extreme, and there's something a bit *Grand Guignol* about that whole second movie anyway.

**Chris:** Overall, though, is *Scream* the best?

**Mike:** It's perfect. I've watched this film probably more than any other film. It's a scary movie that is genuinely scary, that has great characters you love, that is doing things that are ahead of its time, the killer reveal is amazing. It's like a brilliant magic trick.

**Ben:** This is the film that ignited my personal love of funhouse horror, when I don't know if, in the next two

minutes, I'm going to be laughing or screaming.

**Chris:** I think one of the great things about the *Scream* franchise is that every movie, even the less good one, finds someone you like and hurts them. It knows the secret is to make its characters likeable, and then you're going to be on tenterhooks by placing them into any situation of danger.

**Mike:** That's a Wes Craven thing, isn't it? He knows how to make you suffer.

**Ben:** Not many horror franchises have as deep a bench of great characters. That *Scream* crew, in particular, with Sidney and Gale and Dewey, and even some of the characters they bring in later, are really well-conceived.

**Helen:** Honestly, I debated going with *Scream 2* for my top spot, and one of the reasons







I didn't go for it is because I have not forgiven it for Randy's death. Or Timothy Olyphant's hair.

**Chris:** I still have a massive problem with what happens to Dewey in *Scream 5*, although I think it's probably a good thing that they did pull the trigger on one of the Holy Trinity of him, Gale and Sidney. But why did it have to be my boy, Dewey?

**Mike:** They probably should have killed Gale in 6.

**Chris:** Randy's death in *Scream 2*, though. That sequence is phenomenal. So hard to do a huge jumpscare like that in broad daylight. In fact, *Scream 2* is my favourite *Scream* film.

**Ben:** I think it's about the best of the sequels. It's a framework for a series of really great set-pieces. Having to crawl over Ghostface, who's knocked

out in the car, is fantastic. The silent recording booth where Dewey gets stabbed. Although he's okay in the end.

**Mike:** 3 is the worst *Scream* film, but I still think it's a decent horror film, and has some really good ideas.

**Chris:** That theory, that there are no bad *Scream* movies? *Scream 3* is not only a bad *Scream* movie, it's a bad movie.

**Mike:** Sidney revisiting a movie set of her house could have been incredible. But my biggest problem with *Scream 3* is Parker Posey.

**Ben:** That is controversial.

**Mike:** She's too wacky, too *Scooby-Doo*. I think this is the one time in the series where they haven't managed that comedy-horror balance. It tips too much into *Scary Movie* territory for me.

**Ben:** That's what I love about *Scream 3*. I love the wackiness,

and Parker Posey riffing off against Gale and Dewey.

**Helen:** Given the way it's been riffing on the way we sensationalise murder since the very first movie, it makes sense to go to Hollywood and get into the way Hollywood exploits real-life tragedies.

**Mike:** I actually think 4 has the best final act.

**Chris:** The best final act, and my favourite Ghostface, Emma Roberts as Jill. It's slightly sad she gets killed at the end because she's so much fun.

**Ben:** The interesting thing about *Scream* being ahead of the curve is that *Scream 4* is the original 'requel' before *Scream 5* — and we're calling it

that, not 'Scream' — invented the word 'requel'. *Scream 4* has aged incredibly well, with the idea of social media, of influencers wanting to be a celebrity over nothing — that's so interesting.

**Helen:** It's a very clever film, but it was maybe a little bit too cold.

**Mike:** I think *Scream 5* does a lot of the same things as 4 does, but in a way that hit the zeitgeist a little more successfully.

**Ben:** I really commend *Scream 5*. It's such a huge cross to bear, to revive this franchise without Wes Craven or Kevin Williamson and do what they managed to do.

**Helen:** I can't think of any other horror franchises with six instalments or more that maintains this level of quality specifically.

**Chris:** *Scream 6* is one of my favourites. The change of location is great, the characters work better second time around. I'm going to get a lot of shit for this, but I think Sam Carpenter is a more interesting lead than Sidney because of her psychosis.

**Mike:** I would say it's not a great *Scream* film, but it's just a really good slasher film. The killer reveal is a bit stupid and it's a shame we don't have Sidney. So it doesn't feel like a *Scream* movie the way the other five do. But it's got loads of great set-pieces.

**Ben:** It is the *Scream 2* to *Scream's Scream*.

**Helen:** It's really cleverly done. It took some big swings, and it has a plethora of psycho killers. We hadn't gone to three killers before. It feels right for the franchise.

**Mike:** I think *Scream* works best when it comes at the end of a certain pop-culture mood. It's almost like it would be good to get a *Scream* movie every ten years or so, to comment on what's changed in horror.

**Chris:** Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

## THE FINAL LIST



SCREAM  
(1996)



SCREAM 2  
(1997)



SCREAM VI  
(2023)



SCREAM 4  
(2011)



SCREAM  
(2022)



SCREAM 3  
(2000)

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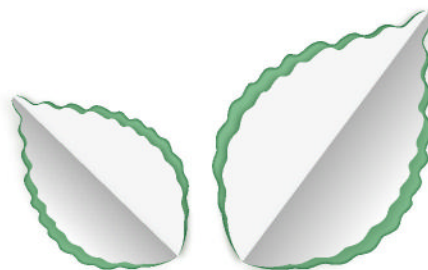
Handmade  
in England

## Talos Awakes

Working directly from the original animation model Ben Southwell in collaboration with Raven Armoury have produced this limited edition bronze of Talos Awakes

No longer in production, only a small number of bronzes remain available

Based on effects characters created by Ray Harryhausen for a Charles H. Schneer Production.  
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## THIS MONTH

## SICKBED NOIR

LAST OCTOBER, AFTER three years of dodging the viral bullet, I finally got Covid (a fairly mild case) and was forced to spend a couple of weeks self-isolating. This gave me a chance to work out what my personal version of comfort-viewing is. It turns out the answer is film noir. I spent over a fortnight in a slightly dissociative state watching non-stop black-and-white movies with tough guys in fedoras and slinky dames up to no good. Often, the titles alone are enough to conjure up a mood — *Night Has A Thousand Eyes*, *Between Midnight And Dawn*, *The Dark Past*, *Escape In The Fog*, *Drive A Crooked Road*, *I Wake Up Screaming*, *The Devil Thumbs A Ride*, *Phantom Lady*.

This was the black-and-silver swirling abyss which opened up when I saw two red lines on the test, and I slipped into anxious yet pleasurable oblivion with Gloria Grahame, Ida Lupino, Dan Duryea, Edmond O'Brien and the other tarnished, battered reliable faces of noir.

In the '40s and '50s, studios made films they classed as crime stories, melodramas or mysteries. Disparate films only got tagged as noir when the genre was diagnosed by the French. The term was popularised in English by Paul Schrader in an essay; with *Taxi Driver*, Schrader may have been the first person ever to sit down and deliberately write a film noir. Science-fiction stories with a virtual reality/sim-world premise often evoke noir — from the Holodeck on *Star Trek* to *The Matrix* or *Dark City*.

THE LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC BRINGS US HIS UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA

MATTHEW BRAZIER



Top to bottom: *Night Has A Thousand Eyes* (1948); Jodie Foster and Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver* (1976).

Filmmakers born after the classic period, generally taken to close with Orson Welles' *Touch Of Evil* in 1958, are still drawn to this particular stretch of film history. I took the epigraph of my first novel, *The Night Mayor* (still in print from Titan Books), from a film book I treasured as a teenager, *Hollywood In The Forties* by Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg (not in print, but hunt out a used copy). *Hollywood In The Forties* was published in 1968, when writers on film had to rely on words (and a skimpy selection of publicity stills) to evoke their subject — and I love the book as much for its prose as its (many) insights.

Here are Higham and Greenberg on the appeal of noir: "Shadow upon shadow upon shadow... the great cameramen of the era pitched every shot in glistening low-key, so that rain always glittered across windows and windscreens like quicksilver, furs shone with a faint halo, faces were barred deeply with those shadows that faintly symbolised some imprisonment of body or soul.

"The visual mode was intensely romantic, and its precise matching to the stories of fatal women and desperate men — straight out of *The Romantic Agony* — gave '40s film noir its completeness as a genre. A world was created, as sealed off from reality as the world of musicals and of Paramount sophisticated comedies, yet in its way more delectable than either."

Delectable, right — in a sort of masochist, ideal-for-the-temporary-invalid way.

## CRYPT KEEPERS KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

### THEY WAIT IN THE DARK

(DIGITAL)

A horror movie rooted in contemporary American desperation, Patrick Rea's film has runaway Amy (Sarah McGuire) and her adopted son Adrian (Patrick McGee) forced to return to her haunted family home. A twisted mystery, with a scary and affecting home stretch.

### NIGHT TRAIN

(DIGITAL)

When PTSD-suffering fed Dora Baird confronts outlaw truck-driver Danielle C. Ryan, we might expect gunplay but get a therapy session. This female-led crime drama has too few medium-fast/mildly furious desert car-chases and a bit too much soap about Ryan needing affordable meds for her poorly son.

### SISTER DEATH

(NETFLIX)

A prequel to the well-liked *Veronica*, Paco Plaza's movie is a period Spanish nunsploitation spook-story. In the 1930s, novice Aria Bedmar — known for having miraculous visions — comes to a haunted convent/orphanage/laundry to be terrorised by an array of sadistic or ghostly nuns.

### THE SACRIFICE GAME

(SHUDDER)

A home-invasion Christmas movie with Mena Massoud enjoying himself as a Manson-type cultist. Director Jenn Wexler gives this school-set shocker a tinselly feel, with appropriate shadows for the haunted basement — in an era where the horror default is underlit murk.

### DARK WINDS

(BLU-RAY)

Tony Hillerman's books about a Navajo detective weren't well served by this 1991 film, but this series (two seasons/cases so far) makes a better fist of the mix of mystery, mysticism and social comment. Zahn McClarnon is terrific as reservation cop Joe Leaphorn.



# The road to Reacher

LEE CHILD ON HOW (AND HOW NOT) TO ADAPT JACK REACHER

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

LEE CHILD'S HAD enough experience of writing Jack Reacher to know that he's the last person in the world who should write Jack Reacher. For the big and small screens, that is. That's for damn sure. "Quietly, secretly, I've written stuff for movies," he tells *Empire*. "I had a long spell of story-doctoring, and you have to got to be so brutal. You cannot do that to your own work. Book writers who do their own screenplay, it is 99 per cent guaranteed to be overlong, too baggy, not good enough."

Of the 28 Jack Reacher novels Child has written (the four most recent ones with his brother, Andrew), four have been adapted — two as films, starring Tom Cruise, and two as Prime Video series starring Alan Ritchson. And while Child has been involved, he's also been in the perfect position to tell us where those adaptations have gone right (and wrong) with his iconic one-man army.

## JACK REACHER (2012)

Let's get the (smaller than usual) elephant in the room out of the way: yes, Tom Cruise is not the same size as Jack Reacher is in the books. Given the character is 6' 5" and 250 lb, few people on this planet are. "Of course there's an ongoing debate, 'Is Tom Cruise Reacher?'" admits Child, who has been doggedly diplomatic about it over the years. "But if you put that aside and just look at it as a movie, it's terrific." Based on the ninth novel, *One Shot* (the events of which are referred to in *Reacher* Season 2), it was the stepping stone to four *Mission: Impossible* movies for writer-director Christopher McQuarrie and Cruise, and has since been reassessed as a hard-as-nails, '70s-style action thriller with an admirable emphasis on character, and an all-timer of a car chase. "I had an interesting experience several years after it came out," says Child. "I was flying somewhere and sitting next to a guy who was watching it on his iPad. I couldn't hear it, but I found that to be a great test for the movie. If you watch it with the sound off, how does it hang together? It's sleek, it's hard, it's clean."



## JACK REACHER: NEVER GO BACK (2016)

Edward Zwick replaced McQuarrie in the director's chair for the sequel, which adapted Book 18. However, perhaps lacking his predecessor's predilection for pulp, Zwick's film was a bit more of a slog, and although it did okay at the box office, Paramount's plans for more Cruise-Reacher films were swiftly abandoned. "The first movie built up the profile of the property to the point where for the second one they'd spend more money on it," says Child. "But it came out more mainstream. And without the writing and directing eccentricity, it just didn't quite fire. It didn't spark."

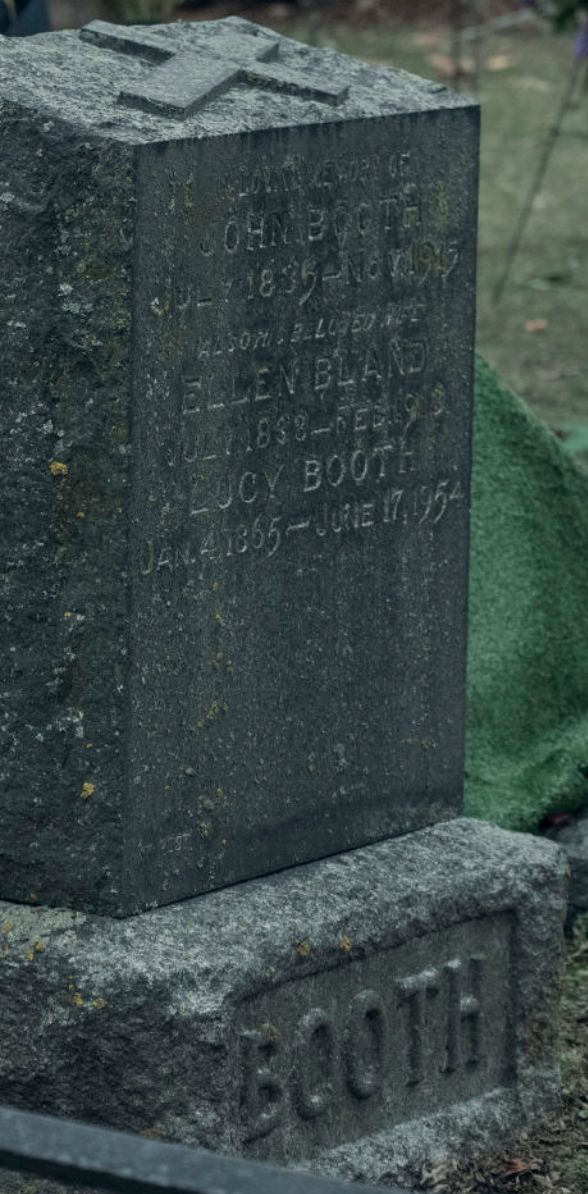
## REACHER: SEASON 1 (2020)

The first season of Amazon's Reacher venture saw them adapt Child's debut novel, *Killing Floor*, in which Reacher saunters into a small town and



winds up investigating the brutal murder of his own brother. And, bar some flashbacks to the hero's childhood that came from additional material, it adapted that first novel pretty damn faithfully. "That's really a direct result of the luxury of that running time," says Child. One major tweak was the introduction of Sgt Neagley (Maria Sten), an old colleague of Reacher's who only shows up in a handful of the books but is nevertheless a fan favourite. "Neagley was a strategic decision. The one thing you cannot do on screen that you can in a book is have the inside of somebody's head," says Child. "Reacher thinks a lot, and there are pages and pages of Reacher puzzling things out. You can't write an eight-minute scene with Alan Ritchson sitting there, thinking. So we needed a secondary character to bolster the exposition."





**Left:** Alan Ritchson faces grave trouble in Season 2 of Prime's adaptation. **Below, left to right:** Tom Cruise and Rosamund Pike in *Jack Reacher* (2012) — with Lee Child himself cameoing as 'Desk Sergeant' between them; Child with Cruise and director Edward Zwick on set of 2016's sequel, *Never Go Back*; A stern Ritchson in *Reacher* Season 1.



### REACHER: SEASON 2 (2023)

Reacher is a lone wolf, but paradoxically one who perhaps works best when he's bouncing off other characters. Which might explain taking 11th book *Bad Luck And Trouble* and making it the second season. For in that, Reacher teams up with what's left of his old Army unit after someone starts bumping them off one by one. "There was no reason to do them in order," says Child. "We had massive discussions about it. The thinking went like this: *Killing Floor* introduces Reacher as a person. So, which book shows his professional life, and what he did while he was in the Army? The result was *Bad Luck And Trouble*." Child chuckles: "That's the thing with Hollywood people; they talk a lot, but they make sense in the end."

REACHER SEASON 2 IS ON PRIME VIDEO NOW

### SPECIAL THANKS TO...

## ELTON JOHN

### GOOD GRIEF DIRECTOR DANIEL LEVY ON GETTING A KARAOKE OKAY FROM THE KING



WHEN DANIEL LEVY wrote a karaoke scene in his big-screen directorial debut, *Good Grief*, he knew there was only one song that would fit the bill: Elton John's beautiful 2001 ballad, *This Train Don't Stop There Anymore*. With its opening lyrics (penned by Bernie Taupin), "You may not believe it, but I don't believe in miracles anymore", it's the perfect song thematically for a man (Levy's Marc) coming to terms with the sudden and shocking death of his husband. But that's not the only reason Levy chose it. "It's a song that I actually sing at karaoke," he says. "I knew it was in my range. I knew I could pull it off. Theoretically."

And he does indeed, in a scene that may have been set in a Paris karaoke bar but which was, for budgetary reasons, shot in *Empire*'s favourite empty orchestra joint, Lucky Voice in London's Soho. ("We tried to dress it up to make it look a little different," laughs Levy, although he didn't fool *Empire*.) That Levy was singing the song live meant the track had to be cleared for use before filming began. Which brings us to why Elton John (left) and his partner, David Furnish, were thanked in the end credits of *Good Grief*. "They were generous enough to let us use the song and not bankrupt the movie," laughs Levy. "We asked, and I kinda went around to them to see if we could do it, and they said yes." Clearly, they didn't want to leave Levy up Schitt's Creek without a paddle.

However, Levy admits that there was no direct contact with Elton about licensing the song. "I didn't speak to him," he says. "But I have in my life." After all, Elton John has always loomed large for Levy. "I was named after an Elton John song," he reveals. Interesting. We wonder which one. **CHRIS HEWITT**

GOOD GRIEF IS ON NETFLIX NOW





# The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY MONTH, WE WILL TEST YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE. ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

## THE SPIDER-MAN MOVIES



- 1 Before Sam Raimi brought Spider-Man to the big screen in 2002, a made-for-television movie was produced in 1978. Who starred as Peter Parker/Spider-Man in that?
- 2 What is the first line we hear Peter Parker say in *Spider-Man*?
- 3 Who played Flash Thompson in Raimi's original *Spider-Man*?
- 4 Who were the villains in James Cameron's famous scriptment for a Spider-Man movie?
- 5 What links the following characters: Ring Announcer, Snooty Usher and Maitre d'?
- 6 In *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, who voices Peter's AI assistant, Karen?



- 7 Which Spider-Man movie has made the most money at the worldwide box office?
- 8 In *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, what does E.D.I.T.H. stand for?
- 9 In the Spider-Verse movies, which number is assigned to Miles Morales' Earth?
- 10 In *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, put Tobey Maguire, Tom Holland and Andrew Garfield into order as Peter 1, Peter 2 and Peter 3.
- 11 What is the alternative name given to Spider-Man after his heroics in Prague in *Spider-Man: Far From Home*?
- 12 What was the first Spider-film to win an Oscar?
- 13 What is the name of the song that plays as Miles Morales makes his leap of faith in *Spider-Man: Into The Spider-Verse*?

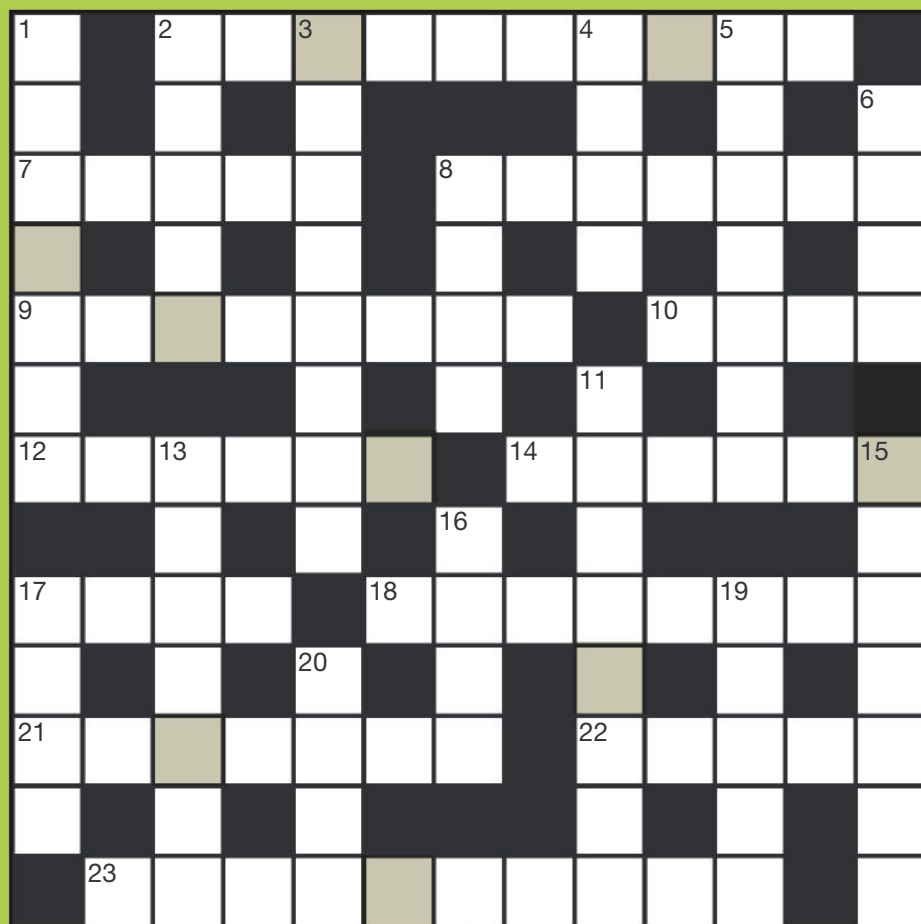


- 14 Two actors play the Shocker in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. Name them.
- 15 Who's missing from this list? Rosemary Harris, XX, Marisa Tomei, Lily Tomlin and, very briefly, Elizabeth Perkins?
- 16 What's the "really old movie" Peter Parker references in *Captain America: Civil War*?
- 17 Who was cast as Mary Jane in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, but was cut from the movie?
- 18 Spider-Punk is arguably *Spider-Man: Across The Spider-Verse*'s standout character. What's his real name?
- 19 Which of these Spider-Man villains hasn't appeared in the movies? Electro, Rhino, the Lizard, Hobgoblin, the Vulture, the Scorpion.
- 20 In *Avengers: Infinity War*, we meet Peter Parker on a school bus. Who's driving it?

**ANSWERS** 1 Nicholas Hammond. 2 "Who am I? You sure you wanna know?" 3 Joe Manganiello 4 Electro and the Sandman 5 Bruce Campbell, who plays each of those characters in Sam Raimi's Spider-Man trilogy 6 Jennifer Connolly 7 *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, with \$1.9 billion 8 Even Dead, I'm The Hero 9 Earth-1610 10 Peter 1 - Tom Holland, Peter 2 - Tobey Maguire, Peter 3 - Andrew Garfield 11 Night Monkey 12 *Spider-Man 2*, for Best Visual Effects 13 'What's Up Danger', by Blackway & Black Caviar 14 Logan Marshall-Green and Bokeem Woodbine 15 Sally Field — they all play versions of Aunt May 16 *The Empire Strikes Back* 17 Shalene Woodley 18 Hobart 'Hobie' Brown 19 Hobgoblin 20 Stan Lee



## CROSSWORD



## ACROSS

- 2 In which there's a photographer in a wheelchair and a possible murder (4,6)
- 7/14 Across John Wick's uncredited co-director (5,6)
- 8 Action movie with Arnold Schwarzenegger as a small-town lawman (3,4)
- 9 —, *Where Art Thou?* (George Clooney film) (1,7)
- 10 It's Fall Guy Gosling (4)
- 12 Rushmore Academy, Rydell High or Ridgemon
- 14 See 7 Across
- 17 It could be Bernard, Debra or Walter (4)
- 18 He's half of a filmmaking sibling duo, but not the *Drive-Away Dolls* half (4,4)
- 21 Shane, who made *This Is England*, or Katie Holmes' Miss (7)
- 22 Underground movie with Franka Potente, from the director of *Triangle* and *Severance* (5)
- 23 It stars Nicolas Cage and Nicolas Cage (10)

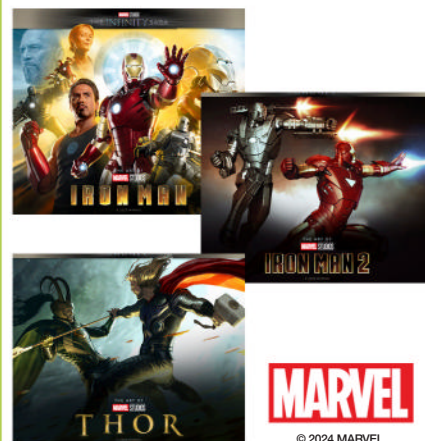
## DOWN

- 1 The tagline was "Party like a mother" (3,4)
- 2 It links Phoenix and what runs through it (5)
- 3 J-horror in which you'd hear the words "kiri kiri" (8)
- 4 Read to you by Howard Beale, Tom Grunick and Veronica Corningstone (4)
- 5 See 16 Down
- 6 His name is Rickman (4)
- 8 Don't look now — this Nicolas is the man who made *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (4)
- 11 Age-appropriate Bond girl Monica (8)
- 13 Tom, who followed Tobey and Andrew (7)
- 15 Husband of Janet Van Dyne (4,3)
- 16/5 Down Alex Proyas' box-office disappointment about ancient deities (4,2,5)
- 17 Animation that features an alien named Oh (4)
- 19 Sinatra's Danny, who was one of 11 (5)
- 20 *There's A Girl In My* — (Peter Sellers movie) (4)

## COMPETITION

# WIN!

## THREE MARVEL BOOKS



MARVEL FANS, ASSEMBLE! The hotly awaited third adventure for Deadpool is coming to cinemas later this year, but until then, to help keep you sustained are three beautiful *The Art Of Marvel Studios* — *The Infinity Saga* books from Titan. First up we go back to where it all began, with a lavish look at Marvel Studios' *Iron Man*, the film that kicked off the hugely successful Marvel Cinematic Universe. Then we have another deep dive into the continuing adventures of Ol' Shellhead with a similarly luxurious look inside sequel *Iron-Man 2*. And finally, in an exciting exclusive, we have the brand-new edition dedicated to *Thor* — not out to buy until April. We have a copy of all three for five lucky winners. To enter, crack the crossword, solve the anagram and follow the instructions below.

THE ART OF MARVEL STUDIOS TITLES ARE AVAILABLE AT  
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## COMPETITION ENDS 11 MARCH

**HOW TO ENTER** Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit [www.empireonline.com/crossword](http://www.empireonline.com/crossword) and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 11 March. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

**MARCH'S ANSWERS ACROSS:** 1 Vito, 3 Dancing, 9 Osage, 10 Forster, 11 Val, 12 Dr Evil, 14 Norman, 16 Ahsoka, 18 Adrien, 20 Eye, 22 Theresa, 23 Piano, 24 Cassidy, 25 Pete. **DOWN:** 1 V For Vendetta, 2 Trailers, 4 Alfred, 5 Cornish, 6 Nuts, 7 Reed, 8 Ariana DeBose, 13 Coverage, 15 Andrews, 17 Wizard, 19 Nope, 21 Vega. **ANAGRAM** BILL MURRAY

**TERMS AND CONDITIONS:** One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 12 March or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. One winner will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winner is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winner will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winner a maximum of three times. If the winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: <http://www.bauerdatapromises.co.uk/>. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email [empire@bauermedia.co.uk](mailto:empire@bauermedia.co.uk). Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing [empire@bauermedia.co.uk](mailto:empire@bauermedia.co.uk). For full T&Cs see <http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html>





## CLASSIC SCENE

"I AM A RIVER TO  
MY PEOPLE!"

# Lawrence Of Arabia

CHOSEN BY **PETER SOHN**  
(DIRECTOR)

**PETER SOHN:** "There's a scene in *Lawrence Of Arabia* that invokes such passion, where Anthony Quinn says, 'I am a river to my people!', and he gestures to the tribe that's outside the tent. And there's energy coming from them, and the cut to Peter O'Toole is so electrifying as he's getting adrenalinised by the connection this man has with his people. That always blew me away. The game is trying to capture electricity on celluloid, and David Lean did it better than almost anyone."

## INT. AUDA ABU TAYI'S TENT – NIGHT

Invited to dine with Auda Abu Tayi (Anthony Quinn) in his tent, *T.E. Lawrence* (Peter O'Toole),

*Sherif Ali (Omar Sharif) and Majid (Gamil Ratib) have just finished a meal.*

*Outside, hundreds of Auda Abu Tayi's men sit. Auda claps his hands. Servants come in and remove the feast. Gunshots, from outside, fill the air. Auda breaks wind. Lawrence laughs. And then Auda begins to speak, and the tone shifts.*

**Auda Abu Tayi:** This thing you work against Aqaba, what profit do you hope from it?

**Ali:** We work it for Feisal of Mecca. The Harith do not work for profit.

**Auda:** Well, if it is in a man to be a servant, Sherif Ali, he could find worse masters than Feisal. But I... I cannot serve.

**Lawrence:** You permit the Turks to stay in Aqaba?

**Auda:** Yes, it is my pleasure.

**Lawrence:** We do not work this thing for Feisal.

**Auda:** No? For the English, then?

**Lawrence:** For the Arabs.

**Auda:** The Arabs. The Howeitat, Ageyil, Ruala, Beni Sakhr — these I know. I have even heard of the Harith. But the Arabs? What tribe is that?

**Lawrence:** They're a tribe of slaves. They serve the Turks.

**Auda:** Well, they are nothing to me. My tribe is the Howeitat.

**Ali:** Who work only for profit.

**Auda:** Who work at Auda's pleasure.

**Lawrence:** And Auda's pleasure is to serve the Turks.

**Auda:** Serve? [He bolts forward, closer to Lawrence] I serve?

**Lawrence:** It is the servant who takes money.

*Auda, outraged, stands up.*

**Auda:** I am Auda Abu Tayi! Does Auda serve?

*The men in his tent yell, and the message is clear: no! Auda turns to the men waiting outside, and directs his question to them.*

**Auda:** Does Auda Abu Tayi serve?

*As one, they chant, "No!" Many of them bang their sticks on the ground. Auda turns back to Lawrence, Ali and Majid.*

**Auda:** I carry 23 great wounds, all got in battle. Seventy-five men have I killed with my own hands in battle. I scatter, I burn my enemies' tents, I take away their flocks and herds. The Turks pay me a golden treasure, yet I am poor because I am a river to my people.

*His men rise to their feet and cheer in agreement. They make a huge cacophony. Lawrence looks on, impressed by the show of support for their leader.*

**Auda:** Is that service?

*Lawrence can barely be heard over the din as he simply says:*

**Lawrence:** No.

**LAWRENCE OF ARABIA IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY  
AND DIGITAL**





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將軍

# SHOGUN

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ORIGINAL SERIES  
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